



BLUE AND GRAY

WEEKLY



Stories of Brave Northern and Southern Boys in the Civil War.

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Price 5 Cents.

UNDER GUARD ;

OR, THE BOYS IN GRAY IN TROUBLE.

By LIEUT HARRY LEE.



Seeing that they were discovered made Will desperate. As the provost guard with a shout burst into the cell, the young Confederate prisoner sprang up and grappled with him, wrenching his musket away from him.

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CHAPTER I.

SURROUNDED BY THE ENEMY.

"Lieutenant Randolph!"

"Here, Captain Prentiss!"

"Has Clements, the scout, returned?"

"No, sir."

There was an anxious light in the eyes of Captain Will Prentiss of the Virginia Grays. He walked with quick step along the front of his brave little company, his keen eye scanning them closely that the slightest detail in equipment or person might not escape him.

It gave him satisfaction to see that they were in condition for efficient service. He knew that there never had been a time since they had taken up arms for the cause of the Confederacy that this was more necessary.

For the Grays, entrusted with a most perilous enterprise, had suddenly found themselves in a literal death-trap, having unwittingly walked into the midst of a large body of the Union foe.

They were practically surrounded. It seemed as if an attack upon them now would mean utter extermination.

After the great Seven Days' Battles before Richmond, encouraged by their great success, the Confederate leaders had decided upon a most daring enterprise.

General Lee was at the head of this and it meant nothing more nor less than an invasion of Maryland, and ultimately a march to Philadelphia, where it was believed terms of peace could be dictated.

But, while Lee was organizing his army for this march, he had taken the precaution to send scouting parties north to Fredericksburg and other Union strongholds. This was the purpose of the Virginia Grays.

This brave little company of Richmond youths had fought valiantly and won great distinction in the Seven Days' Battles. It was owing to this fact that General Lee had placed sufficient trust in them to carry out the present project.

With them was a noted scout named Clements, upon whom young Captain Prentiss placed much reliance for assistance and advice.

Their position at the present moment was not far from the banks of the North Anna River, and the hour was noon.

They were halted in a little glen where a stream trickled down to join its current with that of the river. Trees screened them on all sides.

For the moment their position seemed safe. But at any moment a Union scout or vidette might discover them and give the alarm.

They knew well what their position was, for the foe was

upon all sides of them. Will Prentiss had taken all possible precautions by posting guards and sending out scouts.

So the little company were anxiously awaiting developments. If attacked they would make a bold resistance. But it was more than likely that they would be overwhelmed. Their only hope seemed to be to, if possible, elude the foe and cautiously work their way out of the trap.

Will was anxiously looking for the return of Clements, the scout, who had gone out to see what the chances were for eluding the enemy.

Silence was enjoined upon the boys. They were deployed skilfully with their rear line against the hill so that in case of a sudden attack they would be prepared.

Will Prentiss walked up and down anxiously. His young lieutenant, Fred Randolph, one of Richmond's representative young men, watched him.

"Well, Fred," said Captain Prentiss, pausing in his walk, "I can stand this no longer. I must know how we stand. Clements has been gone an hour. It is almost a moral certainty that he has been captured. I am going to do a little scouting over on that hill, myself."

"Do you think it advisable, Will? If we lose you, we shall be in bad shape."

"Nonsense!" said the young captain. "I shall not get into trouble. If I am discovered I will lead them a chase which will draw them away from this locality. In that case it will be in order for you to draw back and get out of this vicinity as quick as you can. Get back across the Anna and we will be safe."

The young lieutenant saluted.

"I have your orders, sir," he said. "They shall be obeyed."

With this Captain Prentiss took a musket and started to mount the little eminence among the trees. Up he went cautiously, listening and keeping a sharp eye out.

Suddenly he dropped like a shot behind a cedar tree. He caught the gleam of a gun barrel and the color of a blue uniform not a hundred yards distant through the trees.

Then he saw a Union soldier very quietly pass along the ridge. He came nearer and passed within twenty feet of the cedar.

The impulse was upon Will Prentiss and in an instant he was upon his feet. It was a daring thing he did.

"Halt! Hands up and surrender!"

The Union soldier turned as if upon a pivot. Then Will gave a start of horror. The fellow's face was frightfully scarred and mutilated. The wounds were hardly healed and their aspect gave him an expression of countenance most unnatural.

Will saw that he was therefore not a scout or a sentry, but a straggler. But he decided to make a prisoner of him.

"All right! Don't shoot, Johnny!" he sung out. "I surrender!"

"Drop your gun!"

The soldier did so.

"Come forward!" said Will. "Right face! March! If you try to escape I'll shoot you!"

"Don't you be afraid, Johnny. My fighting days are over. I am trying to get back North."

"What is on the other side of the hill?"

The prisoner looked surprised:

"Don't you know?"

"No."

"It's the rear guard of Percival's Brigade. They are going to move down the North Anna and go into Fredericksburg."

"When?"

"In the morning, I believe."

Will felt a thrill. It was apparent that his proximity was not yet known to the foe.

"See here, my man," he said. "You look badly used up."

"Should say I was. I had my face smashed by the explosion of a shell at Savage's Station. I'm only just out of the field hospital. I'm applying for my discharge."

"You ought to have it. What's your name?"

"Jonathan Ward! I belong in Vermont."

"Well, Jonathan, I don't wish you any harm. If you'll give me a little bit of information I'll treat you as a non-combatant and see that you are set free in a day or two. What do you say?"

The wounded man turned his hideous face upon Will and said:

"I'll tell ye all I know."

"Good! You say Percival's Brigade is just in front of us and is going to move down the North Anna in the morning?"

"Yes."

"Well, now what is over yonder to the east?"

"That is the right wing of Percival's Brigade."

"And what is to the west and south of us?"

"General Henry and six regiments of infantry," replied Ward. "It looks as if you were all surrounded."

"There is the rub," said Will Prentiss. "I have got to pull out of the scrape in some way or other."

"If Percival moves in the morning you can fall in behind him and perhaps slip through to the north. But this is a bad region for Johnnies, just now. It's alive with Union troops," said Jonathan.

"That is what I was thinking. But if I am discovered in the meantime——"

Jonathan Ward shrugged his shoulders.

"That would be bad," he said. "The best thing you could do would be to surrender."

"I'll never do that," gritted Will. "Better death than that."

"Pshaw! You'd get used like a brick! We don't starve our prisoners the way you do! They get good food and good treatment until exchanged."

But before more could be said a startling thing happened. The distant rapid discharge of firearms was heard, followed by yells and shouts of combatants.

Then, down through the trees came rapid footsteps. Will's musket went to his shoulder, but a voice cried:

"Hold up! it's a friend! Don't shoot!"

Then the young captain lowered his musket and a sharp cry escaped him.

"Clements, the scout!"

It was indeed the scout, breathless and excited. He glanced at Jonathan Ward and then said:

"Bring up your company, Captain Prentiss. I believe we're going to pull through, all right. Stuart has made a dash from Hanover Court House and he is driving in Percival's Brigade at this moment. If you post your men on the other side of this hill, you can assist him."

Will Prentiss felt a wild thrill of triumph.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "It's all right. I know now that we will get out of the scrape."

He started to go back down the hill but hesitated at sight of Ward.

"You remember your promise, captain," cried the Union prisoner. "Why not let me go now? I can't do any harm."

"All right!" cried Will with impulse. "I release you on parole. If you ever take up arms against the South again you will suffer the penalty."

"Don't you fear, Johnny! I'm going back to Vermont as fast as I can get there."

And the prisoner slid away. The scout looked at Will questioningly.

"Is that advisable?" he asked.

"I think it's all right," said the young captain. "We can't bother with prisoners now, anyway. I'll bring the boys right up."

Will darted back to the glen. In a few moments the Grays were advancing on the double-quick to gain the hill in the rear of Percival.

The sounds of the conflict on the other side were heavy now, and it was plain that a desperate fight was in progress.

When Will Prentiss reached the glen he met Fred Randolph, who was much excited:

"It sounds like a fight over there, Will," he cried.

"It is," replied the boy-captain. "Stuart has made a dash in Percival's rear and is driving him back. It is our chance to escape."

"What are your orders?"

"Fall in! Forward! Double-quick!"

The Grays needed no more authoritative command. Instantly and with well-drilled precision they fell into line and went rapidly up the hill.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE OLD CHURCH.

Up through the trees went the Virginia Grays. They reached the summit and now, as they emerged upon the other slope which was cleared, they beheld a thrilling scene.

In a wide stretch of fields below they saw the white tents and paraphernalia of a Union encampment.

A long wagon-train was winding its way eastward. Its course was marked by clouds of powder smoke. Beyond, the lines of Stuart's cavalry could be seen trying to cut off the wagon-train.

Masses of troops in blue were seen charging across the field to repel Stuart's attack. It was to the Grays a most enlivening scene.

Will quickly decided upon his best move. He saw that but a light guard had been left behind with the tents and the commissary.

His force was small, but he believed that a determined attack would enable them to do the foe a great deal of damage. At the same time they could get around to the north and perhaps join Stuart.

But the young captain was not rash.

He did not plunge headlong into a fight which might have been a defeat for him. The Grays were held in check long enough for the charging regiments to get some distance away.

Of course a reserve had been left in the camp. But it did not greatly exceed the strength of the Grays.

Indeed, this plan of a rear attack was all that Will had before him. There was no choice.

Henry's Brigade to the south would be sure to hear the firing and move up to the relief of Percival.

What was done therefore by either Stuart or the Grays must be done quickly. But promptness was an attribute which Will Prentiss did not lack.

He waited therefore long enough to make sure that advance would be safe. Then he gave the order:

"Ready, Grays! Deploy!"

The little company instantly fell into line of battle. They moved down the hillside until within range.

By this time they were seen. The Union reserve seemed panic-stricken by this unexpected infantry attack in their rear.

They opened fire and the Grays answered it. For some moments bullets flew thick and fast.

But the Grays were sheltered by a rail fence while the Union guard was wholly exposed. Will saw that the time for a desperate dash was at hand.

So he gave the order:

"Ready, Grays! Fix bayonets! Charge!"

With a rousing cheer, the Grays went through the rail fence and across the field.

They were among the tents a moment later. The reserve had scattered before them, evidently thinking that at least they represented a full regiment.

The Grays drove the reserve before them and in a few minutes the whole camp was in their hands.

With great rapidity they set fire to the tents and such stores as they could not carry. They had not time, however, to fully accomplish the destruction of the camp before they saw one of the Union regiments coming back.

It was now in order to retreat. Will did not return the way they came. He rapidly drew the Grays off to the north so as to, if possible, effect a junction with Stuart.

Whether the great Confederate cavalry leader was conscious of the work being done by the Grays, Will did not know. But it was certain that much damage had been done the foe.

Had it been a question of Percival's Brigade alone, Stuart might have wiped it out. But now a new factor appeared on the scene.

Over the distant ridges swarmed lines of blue. It was Henry and his brigade coming to the assistance of Percival.

Will Prentiss saw that the Grays were now in danger of being caught between two fires themselves. So he gave the order to fall back rapidly.

This they were fortunately enabled to do and soon they had reached a stretch of woods to the north of the Union camp. Here they were able to rest a moment.

"Hurrah!" cried Fred Randolph. "That was a close pinch, Will, but we're out of it!"

"Yes," agreed the young captain. "Stuart unconsciously helped us out of a bad scrape. If we had remained where we were we would certainly have been captured."

"Hello! What is that?"

Fred drew himself up and pointed to the distant ridge where Stuart had been making charges upon the Union infantry.

Will was fully as surprised. The Confederate cavalry was falling back.

"Stuart is retiring!" said Will with a thrill of disappointment. "That is too bad."

"So it is," agreed Fred. "I was in hopes that he could defeat Percival. But the odds are too great."

"I fear we cannot join Stuart. In fact, on the whole, I don't know as it is altogether desirable. We have a far different mission to accomplish."

"That is true, Captain Prentiss," said Clements, the scout. "I would make no great effort to join Stuart. He is not in our line. We could not keep up with his movements, anyway."

"Then our own preservation is the main thing to consider?"

"Yes."

Accordingly, Will gave orders to the Grays to continue to fall back to the north. The little company left Stuart to settle matters finally with the Union force. Soon they were marching rapidly down a winding highway, which was taking them rapidly away from the scene of the battle.

But Will Prentiss knew that the Grays were every moment advancing nearer Fredericksburg and consequently approaching the Union lines. This was adding to their peril.

The afternoon was waning and night would soon be at hand. Will knew that it was necessary to find a safe place for a camp.

And as the boys had been under forced marching nearly all day he decided to make camp early. The little road wound down through a growth of oaks and they came to a building by the roadside, which attracted their attention at once.

It was a church, built partly of stone and partly of brick. From its appearance of decay it was plain that it had not been used for many years as a place of worship.

The windows were almost devoid of glass. The roof was moss-grown and the belfry rotting. The bell, which had once pealed forth summons to the countryside, had fallen from its beam and could ring no more.

There was no other building near. The church had ap-

parently been built by the co-operation of a number of communities at an equal distance from each. This was an old custom in Virginia, which would explain its isolated position.

At any rate, Will Prentiss conceived the idea of selecting the church as a place of bivouac.

It offered comfortable quarters for the fact that the air was heavy with a threatening rain.

So Will gave the order to halt.

The Grays drew up in line before the church, and the young captain, with his lieutenant, mounted the rotting steps.

As they stepped into the vestibule they were brought to a sudden halt. A dull groan of agony came to their ears.

It seemed to come from the main part of the church. A door hung rotting on its hinges. Will started to push it open.

As it swung back he came to a startled halt. For a moment he was too astonished to speak or act.

Before the threshold stood a slender girl, dressed in the Southern fashion, but pale and rigid. Her beauty was marvelous and Will saw that she was high-bred as well.

Her dark lustrous eyes were filled with a determination which the young captain at once recognized. In her right hand was a pistol levelled at his head.

"Go away!" she said in a tense tone. "Don't come in here! He who tries to enter here shall die!"

Will stepped back. For a moment or two he was at a loss what to do. What did it mean?

But after a time he saluted profoundly and said:

"Pardon me. I did not think I was intruding upon private property. This seems to be an abandoned church."

"It is," she replied. "But I am in possession now."

"Far be it from me to deprive you of that," said Will. "But will you kindly explain why you seek to bar us out? The night is at hand and a storm is imminent. There should be plenty of room in this edifice for us all."

Her eyes took on a fierce light.

"March on with your men," she cried. "You are no true Southerner or you would not refuse the command of one of my sex."

"I am willing at all times to sacrifice even my life for the women of the South," he said courteously. "And if you can show me a good motive for your inhospitable attitude, I will certainly go on and leave you undisturbed."

The words had barely left his lips when a deep groan came from the interior of the church. A husky voice said:

"Let them in, Edith. They can scarce harm me now, for my days are numbered. Confederate though he is, I don't believe he will do harm to a wounded man."

"No! no!" cried the young girl almost fiercely. "They will make a prisoner of you, Benton—they shall not take you—I will die first!"

Her pistol still covered Will and her attitude was desperate. The young captain put up his hand.

"Put down your pistol, young woman," he said. "I promise you that no harm shall be done to any wounded man. If he is your father, or brother, or lover, it is all

the same. From the weakness of his voice I should say that he needed medical attendance. Our surgeon will attend to him. I assure you that you need have no fear. I am a man of honor."

Will's words seemed to convince the young girl more than aught else. Her arm wavered, a faintness seemed to come over her and she leaned against the door-jamb.

"May God judge you, if you do not speak the truth!" she said. "My life depends upon his. You may enter."

Removing their caps Will and Fred crossed the threshold.

CHAPTER III.

THE FUGITIVE.

The interior of the church showed decay as much as the exterior. The lines of pews were tumbling in a rotten ruin, the pulpit had fallen and the high arches of the nave were crumbling and cracked.

All this was noted in one sweeping glance. But another sight claimed the attention of the two young officers.

Two horses were tethered by the chancel rail. Blankets spread upon the rotting floor partly covered the figure of a man in the uniform of a Confederate cavalryman.

His appearance was ghastly. His handsome face was pallid and blood-streaked. His head was bound with strips of cotton cloth. His eyes were wild and feverish.

In an instant Will was bending over him solicitously.

"How is this, comrade?" he said. "Why should you fear us? We all wear the gray."

"I do not fear you," replied the wounded cavalryman. "I fear nothing. Death is but transition to a better life. But my beloved companion, who is my promised wife, knows how deeply wronged I have been. Yes, foully wronged. I have fought and bled for the South and her holy cause, and yet, at this moment, my life is sought by my own comrades."

A fierce light shone in his eyes as he spoke these words. The girl sank down and took his head in her lap.

Will's face showed his surprise.

"Your words excite my curiosity," he said. "Is it some personal feud?"

"It is the villainy of a foe and a rival," replied the wounded man.

"Is he responsible for your present condition?"

"Yes."

"But—what has that to do with us? Why should you have feared us?"

The wounded man partly rose on his elbow. He looked at Will intensely.

"I will tell you the story," he said. "I am branded a spy and a traitor. I am charged with selling information to the Union Government. It is false as false can be. But the charge was brought against me by one who is higher in power and who has greater influence. That is why I am a fugitive—hunted for my life. She brought me the warning just in time, God bless her. We rode away together. I

wanted to remain and die if need be, but she bribed my guards and brought me here. We were pursued and fired at. It was in the dark and our horses brought us hither."

"Who brought this charge against you?" asked Will.

"Colonel Hector Delaplaine!"

"What! Colonel Delaplaine of Stuart's Light Horse?"

"Yes."

Will was dumbfounded. He knew Delaplaine, who was a most efficient officer and a daring cavalryman. He had never suspected him capable of such a game.

"That seems strange," he said. "I know Delaplaine well. You say that he has trumped up this charge against you from motives of a personal nature?"

"Yes, from hatred and jealousy. My name is Benton Brough. I am lieutenant in the same regiment of horse. Delaplaine is a suitor of Miss Cameron, but she declined him. She is my betrothed. Delaplaine was infuriated by her refusal of his suit and swore revenge upon me. This is his method."

"That is infamous!" said Will forcibly. "The matter shall be set right. If you are innocent, surely it should come out at the trial."

"It did not come out," said Brough. "He had evidence against me, but it was manufactured. I could not refute it and the court found me guilty."

"What? then you are under sentence——"

"Of death! Yes!"

For a moment there was silence. Will looked into the pallid, earnest face of the wounded man. Then he turned and looked at the girl.

Beautiful as a dream she was. Her eyes were dilated half with fear, half with eager hope. Her glance seemed to pierce Will, so intent was it.

"You believe him?" she asked. "You will not betray him?"

Will bowed slowly and replied:

"I should be loth to discover that he had not spoken the truth. Be assured my sympathies are with you both."

A glad cry escaped her.

"I thank you," she said earnestly. "I know that you are kind and true. You will not betray us?"

"You may depend upon it that I will not betray you," replied Will. "Yet, what can you do? You cannot remain here. At any moment you may be captured by some company of Union scouts."

"You—you are going back to the Confederate camp?" she asked.

"No!" replied Will. "Not yet! We are on scout duty! It is my purpose to march down as near Fredericksburg as possible and inspect the enemy's position. This is a mission given me by General Lee."

A shade of anxiety was in her eyes. She looked at her wounded lover and then about her in a hunted way.

"It is true that we cannot remain here," she said. "At any moment we may be found by Union raiders. Yet he is unable to go further." She wrung her hands silently.

Will paused dubiously. His sympathy was with both, but he could not see his way clear to advise them.

By this time the Grays were marching into the church and making themselves as comfortable as possible.

Some lanterns were hung from the walls, dimly lighting the interior. They stacked their muskets in a long line down the centre aisle. The surgeon attended to the wounded man.

Blankets were spread upon the floor for comfortable sleeping quarters. It was not an easy bed, but yet, a shade better than sleeping out on the damp ground.

Camp-fires had been built just outside and coffee and hard-tack were being prepared. The scene was that of a genuine soldier's bivouac.

The young girl had flitted away to one of the camp-fires where a kind-hearted soldier boy was preparing her a cup of coffee for the wounded man.

Will sank down beside Brough and waited for her return. The latter's feverish gaze was fixed upon him intently.

"I have heard much of you and your brave boys, Prentiss," he said. "I saw you lead a charge at Glendale."

"We have always tried to do our duty," replied Will. "That is a soldier's obligation. But tell me, who is this young woman who has so valiantly stood by you?"

"She is Edith Cameron," replied Brough. "Her father is Judge Orville Cameron, of Cameron Hall, Henrico County. You are a Virginian. Certainly you know of the Camerons."

Will's face lit up.

"Indeed I do," he cried. "I have heard my sister Nell speak of Edith Cameron, many times."

"She is an angel on earth," declared the fugitive, earnestly. "But for her I would have been shot as a traitor. I can only pray for a recovery of strength to enable me to face my traducer and disprove the foul charge against me."

"I hope you will," replied the young captain.

"Doubtless, you think it strange that Edith Cameron is not at this moment safe in Richmond, with others of her sex and standing. But you do not know her. She could not remain idle when the country needed her sympathy and help. She has filled a position as nurse in the field hospitals. Many a dying man has blessed her with his last breath. Many a suffering soul has gone to his final rest cheered by her bright presence and tender care. She is an angel, Prentiss, and I am the happiest man on earth, for she is mine."

The wounded man raised himself on his elbow and grasped Will's hand. His feverish gaze was fixed upon the young captain.

"Prentiss, as you hope for God's favor, I adjure you to protect her from that villain, Delaplaine. He will hound her to the ends of the earth. I know that. The judge, her father, is old and decrepit. You are a man of honor. These are times of war—nothing is sure—you can put trust in but few. Swear to me, Prentiss, that you will protect her. Swear it. Let me die with your promise. Don't remonstrate. I know I am going to die, but I wouldn't tell her of it. Poor girl."

In all his life Will had never been more deeply affected. He saw that every word spoken by Brough was true.

Death was in his hollow gaze. There was no help for him. For one moment the young captain returned that earnest gaze of the dying man.

"Brough," he said, "I don't want you to give up hope. You will not die. But if it will cheer you I will say that if you do die, on my honor as a man and a Virginian, I will stand between Miss Cameron and the machinations of Colonel Delaplaine."

With unutterable relief the stricken man sank back. A beatific expression seemed to come over his face. Just then Edith returned with the coffee.

With his head in her lap she gave him sips of the coffee. It seemed to stimulate him and he said:

"You will bring me back to life and strength if any power on earth can do it, Edith."

She caressed his fevered brow. Will had stepped back with a strange feeling of reverence—a sensation of the proximity of the dark shadow of the Death Angel.

And his prescience was justified. In that moment, even as he stood there, a sharp anguished cry welled from the young girl's lips.

In an instant Will was by her side. The young lieutenant's head had fallen forward upon his breast, there had been one tremor and all was over.

For a moment Edith Cameron was like one stricken. White and set was her beautiful face. She swayed a moment while her lips moved dumbly. Then she grew calm.

"Be brave, Miss Cameron," said Will quietly. "It is the will of God."

"I beg you to leave me for a time," she said. Then she sat down with her hands clasped over her knees and bent her gaze upon the dead face. Will walked softly away.

A word to one of the sentinels, and he took a station a few feet from the spot to warn away any intruder. Will went back to his men and busied himself with seeing to their comfort.

Already the storm had begun to break outside. The Grays came in and sought shelter from the rain.

Thus matters were when Fred Randolph joined Will.

"The wounded man over there is dead, is he not?" asked the young lieutenant.

"Yes," replied Will.

"Very sad, indeed."

"It is. I say, Fred, you have heard of Judge Cameron, of Henrico County?"

"Yes."

"Well, that young woman is his daughter. She has been engaged in the field hospitals as a nurse. You know Delaplaine, of Stuart's staff?"

"I do."

"He is responsible for the death of this young lieutenant. If what he and Miss Cameron declare, is true, Delaplaine is one of the worst villains in the army. He has, out of jealousy, foisted a false charge of treachery upon Brough, which has made of him a fugitive and now has resulted in his death."

"The dark scoundrel!" exclaimed Fred. "I never did have a good opinion of him, Will."

"Of Delaplaine?"

"Yes."

"Well, he has certainly driven to his death one of the bravest and best young officers in our army."

"And the girl——"

"She is threatened with his villainous persecutions. My last word with Brough was a promise to protect her against this villain."

Fred grasped Will's hand.

"Count me in on that," he cried. "Nothing can give me greater pleasure than to thwart the machinations of a villain."

CHAPTER IV.

THWARTING A VILLAIN.

"I am glad to hear you say that, Fred," cried Will. "She will certainly need a champion. Between us I think we can hold Colonel Delaplaine off."

"We will do our best."

"Hello! What's that?"

The stirring peal of a bugle sounded upon the night air. The clatter of horses' hoofs rang out sharply.

In an instant all was confusion in the church. The Grays ran for their muskets. Will unsheathed his sword and gave sharp orders to his men to form for defense.

The guard outside had been forced in. The next moment the tread of heavy feet was heard in the vestibule and then into the church burst an officer and a dozen cavalymen.

The moment Will's gaze lit upon them apprehension vanished. They wore gray uniforms and the insignia of Stuart.

The officer wore a colonel's straps and was a tall, darkly handsome man. But there was a cruel expression in his face. His appearance did not in any sense invite confidence.

His flashing gaze rested upon Will Prentiss. In an instant he saluted haughtily.

"I'm Colonel Delaplaine, of Stuart's Light Horse!" he cried. "Who are you?"

"Captain Will Prentiss of the Virginia Grays."

"Oh, the deuce! Is that you, Prentiss?" he cried, stepping forward. "I'm looking for an escaped prisoner. His name is Benton Brough and he was sentenced to death as a traitor. Have you seen anything of him?"

Delaplaine had not glanced about him and did not see Edith Cameron, who had risen to her feet and stood like a white statue over the body of her dead lover, her gaze fixed with terrible intentness upon the man responsible for all her trouble.

"I have seen Benton Brough," said Will quietly. "But you are mistaken in the assumption that he is a traitor."

Delaplaine stared at Will, but exultation shone in his eyes.

"Where is he?" he demanded.

"Beyond your power," replied the boy-captain in the same quiet way.

"What's that? Do you mean to say that he has escaped?"

"From trials and troubles, yes! He is dead!"

For a moment Delaplaine's face was a study.

"Dead?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Fiends and furies! don't tell me that, for I won't believe it! He is too shrewd a fox to sacrifice his life. Tell me the truth. Dead or alive, I must have him. Where is he?"

"You are responsible for his death," said Will coldly.

"His body is yonder."

Delaplaine turned and his gaze roamed to the corner where was the little pallet on which the wounded man had lain. The young girl, Edith Cameron, stood over him and staring in a strange blank way at the Confederate colonel.

A light of fiendish exultation flashed from Delaplaine's eyes. He started forward.

"The fates are kind," he cried. "There is our game, boys. The man, dead or alive. The girl is his accomplice."

Delaplaine's men moved forward. But with a sharp tone Will cried:

"Halt! Right about face!"

Instinctively Delaplaine's men obeyed the order and stood at attention. Will again shouted:

"Attention, Grays! Forward, double-quick! Company, front! Halt!"

Quick as a flash the evolution was performed and a line of the Grays with bristling bayonets opposed Delaplaine and his men.

The villainous colonel was for a moment furious beyond expression.

"What's this?" he shouted. "Treachery! Order your men back, sir! What do you mean?"

"I mean, Colonel Delaplaine, that your little game concerning this helpless young woman is up. You cannot persecute her further. It is all over."

"Furies!" hissed the colonel. "Do you mean to say that you will dispute my authority to take that body and the girl as a prisoner?"

"Take the body if you will," said Will, "but the young woman is free to go her way."

"You dare to usurp my authority? Do you know what that means in our courts?"

"I don't know and I don't care," cried Will. "I know your whole game and I propose to block it."

"Get out of my way!"

"Not until you promise that you will not molest her."

"You refuse to obey your superior officer?" cried Delaplaine hotly. "Do not forget that a colonel outranks a simple captain."

"Delaplaine," said Will, "I know your whole scoundrelly game concerning this young woman. You have sent her lover to his death and you hope now to get her into your power. I promised Brough as he drew his last breath that I would defend her against you, and I mean to do it to the last drop of blood in my body."

For a moment Delaplaine glared at Will Prentiss with hatred and fury. He took a step forward and whipped out his heavy sabre.

"Prentiss," he said with a brutal hiss, "I am here to get that young woman who was an accomplice of that dead traitor. You and I serve under the same flag, but we will fight to the death if you do not yield."

"Fight then, for we will never yield!" said Will firmly. "Attention, company! Ready arms! Aim!"

The rank of the Grays brought their muskets to their shoulders. It was a formidable spectacle which Delaplaine faced.

He had but a squad of men with him and they had only the carbine and sabre. They were no match for the infantry.

He was defeated. With a baffled imprecation he sheathed his sword.

"I shall report you to General Stuart," he said savagely. "You will hang for this, I promise you that."

"I do not fear," said Will quietly. "I am here by the orders of General Lee and he is higher in authority than General Stuart. I am not in doubt while defending the honor of a Southern girl from such a villain as you."

Delaplaine's sword half leaped from its sheath and for a moment he glared at Will with insane fury. But the cold and deadly muzzles of the muskets caused him to shrug his shoulders and step back.

"All right!" he gritted. "You win now, but my time will come later."

"Perhaps it will," said the boy-captain coldly. "But we will wait until then."

"You are right! We will wait! wait!" emphasized Delaplaine. Then he strode out of the church and into the darkness of the night. Presently the clatter of his horse's departing hoofs was heard.

"Ugh!" said Fred Randolph. "Wasn't he in an ugly mood! He will square accounts with us some time, Will."

"If he gets the chance."

"Yes."

"I wish he'd set his dogs on," cried Joe Spotswood, the orderly sergeant. "You bet we were ready for him."

Edith had gone back to the side of the dead lieutenant. She was calm now. She had covered his cold form with a blanket.

Will approached her.

"Nothing more can be done for him to-night, Miss Cameron," he said. "To-morrow we will see that he has a fitting burial. I think you had better seek rest."

"I thank you, Captain Prentiss," she said quietly. "I shall follow your advice."

A corner of the church was set apart for her use and the boys contributed a number of their blankets to make her a warm couch. Exhausted nature asserted itself and she fell asleep.

Picket guards had been posted outside the old church. The rain was falling heavily and the duty was a most dreary one.

Will paced up and down the aisles of the church. The boys had stretched themselves out in long lines the length of the room and many were asleep.

Outside the wind howled and the rain fell. It was near

midnight when a figure, wet and dripping, crept into the church.

It was Clements, the scout.

In an instant Will advanced to meet him.

"Oh, Clements!" he exclaimed. "Where have you been?"

"I have been over to see Stuart," replied the scout.

Will was surprised.

"Is that so? What have you to report?"

"The Union brigades they encountered this afternoon are in full retreat down the North Anna. They will, no doubt, fall back to Fredericksburg."

"Will Stuart pursue?"

"He will."

"Did you see him personally?"

"I did."

"What did you learn?"

"I learned that Pope's advance upon Richmond has been abandoned. The roads toward the Shenandoah Valley seem to be clear. The foe are concentrating about Washington."

"Ah! General Lee ought to know this. He will have no further hesitation in carrying out his plan of an advance into Maryland."

The scout shook his head dubiously.

"I don't advise it," he said.

"Why?"

"I don't believe that the people of Maryland are going to welcome us as warmly as is hoped. Our army will be a good ways from its communications. To be cut off on that side of Washington might mean defeat."

Will was silent a moment. The words of the scout struck him forcibly. There seemed deep logic in them.

"General Lee has much foresight," he said. "No doubt he has considered that."

"No doubt," agreed Clements. "Still, I cannot feel that it is for the best. In fact I believe it more ill advised than McClellan's advance upon Richmond."

Dark forebodings of the future came to Will Prentiss.

CHAPTER V.

MARYLAND! MY MARYLAND!

"I hope it may not be so," said Will. "It would seem as if our great generals, Jackson, Hill and Longstreet, would advise General Lee against the move."

"They would hardly venture to do that," said Clements. "If you knew General Lee's firm purpose as well as I do you would know that it would be of little use. You saw that on the heights of Malvern. Assault after assault was made by his orders upon an impregnable position. Lives were thrown away."

"I presume General Lee reckoned that it was necessary to carry those heights to complete the destruction of the Union Army. It was the one barrier that held him back."

"That is true," admitted Clements. "Yet the best blood of Virginia was given up there to accomplish—what? A failure!"

The scout spoke with deep logic as Will well knew. He

was not the only one who had viewed the attack on Malvern with disapprobation.

The Confederate generals had strongly advised against it. Yet General Lee persisted. In justification it might be said that Malvern was the key to the whole situation. Its capture would have meant the annihilation of the escaping Army of the Potomac.

"Not that my confidence in General Lee is in the least shaken," said Clements, "I think he is our leader. But I hope that he will not embark upon his Maryland expedition."

"Why," said Will, "it has seemed to me that that was the best move that he could make. To threaten Washington from the north, to even menace Philadelphia, would shake the Union to its foundations. Then we have every assurance that the Maryland people will rise with us."

"Don't you believe it," said the scout, "they will never do it."

"We have just had a visit from a detail of Stuart's cavalry," said Will.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Colonel Delaplaine was just here with a squad of men upon what I consider a cowardly mission."

With this Will told the story of Benton Brough, and the young girl who had plighted her troth with him. The scout listened with much interest. He was indignant at the conduct of Delaplaine.

"I know the fellow," he said. "He is a scoundrel. I saw him hang a poor farmer up in the mountains for a cowardly whim of his own. I am glad you got the best of him. But I fear you have not heard the last of him."

"Do you think so?"

"Well, he is a very vindictive fellow and there is no doubt he will try to get square with you."

"I shall hope to be at all times ready for him. One thing is certain, if he attempts to do that young nurse harm I will treat him as he deserves."

"Good! I think General Stuart will back you up in it."

"By the way, Clements, is there any likelihood of a Union regiment stumbling upon us to-night?"

"So far as I am able to discover there is none. I have scoured the region about here pretty thoroughly. The main body of Union troops have drawn back toward Fredericksburg."

"Then we may sleep to-night?"

"Yes."

Will was fatigued with the events of the day and only too glad to turn in and get rest. He rolled himself up in his blanket as did the rest of the boys and went to sleep.

The day broke dull and stormy. It was a cheerless outlook from the shattered windows of the old church.

Rain came down in torrents, the ground was a sea of mud and the air was damp and chill.

Will Prentiss was undecided what to do. It had been his intention to continue his scouting trip to the north some distance further and then work over toward Fredericksburg in hopes of getting a good line on the fortifications.

But it seemed like an act of folly to venture from their present dry quarters into the mud and rain.

Had it been necessary to make a forced march the young captain would not have shrunk from the ordeal. But a day's delay could not greatly matter.

"What's the order, captain?" asked Fred Randolph as they met at the church entrance. "Are we to go on?"

Will shook his head.

"I think not," he said. "We are comfortably housed here. I believe we will wait until the weeping of the skies ceases."

"I believe it is a good plan. We will get wet to the skin and if we were attacked en route we would be in bad shape to make a fight."

So it was decided to remain in the old church until the rain should cease. This led to a number of incidents.

The Grays had responded to roll-call and were now preparing their morning meal. After this was over there was a natural inclination to indulge in games and a jollification.

But Will called their attention to the silent form of the dead lieutenant over in the church corner, where the young nurse yet sat in her grief.

"We must respect the dead," he said. "Wait until we have performed the last sad service."

It was decided to inter the dead lieutenant in the burial plot back of the church. In lieu of a coffin the body was rolled in blankets and draped with a Confederate flag.

Then Will etched an inscription with a bayonet upon a slab of slate taken from the church wall. With due formality and solemnity the remains of Lieutenant Brough were buried. A salute was fired over the grave.

Then the squad marched back to the church. The career of a brave man had ended.

The rain, which had seemed to find a lull during the burial service, now came down harder than ever. The Grays were glad to gather in the church and sing their patriotic songs.

Their voices rose with swelling chorus in the popular refrain of the time:

"The despot's heel is on thy shore,
Maryland!

His touch is at thy temple door.
Maryland!

Avenge the patriotic gore
That flecked the streets of Baltimore
And be the battle queen of yore,
Maryland! My Maryland!

"Hark! to thy wandering son's appeal,
Maryland!

My Mother State, to thee I kneel,
Maryland!

For life and death, for woe and weal,
Thy peerless chivalry reveal,
And gird thy beauteous limbs with steel,
Maryland! My Maryland!"

This beautiful lyric, the first verses of which are given above, was most popular in the South during the war. The Grays sang it heartily and with enthusiasm.

Finally, after it had been sung again and again, the irrepressible orderly sergeant, Joe Spotswood, rushed out onto the floor and began a lively dance.

The boys cheered and urged him on. The dusty old floor creaked and swayed and trembled.

Still Joe kept on. All might have been well but for Sam Payton, corporal of the guard, who, unable to restrain himself, now rushed out and joined in the dance.

The boys cheered and urged the dancers on. It was lively work for a time.

But suddenly something happened and it was quite unexpected, too.

There was a creak and a splintering sound. A section of the rotten old floor settled instantly and down went the two dancers in a cloud of dust and shattered lumber into the church cellar.

There was an uproar then.

To many of the boys this was exceedingly funny and they nearly split their sides in laughter. Others, however, saw a serious side to the affair.

It was odd, that while the Grays had been in the church all night, nobody had thought of looking into the cellar. As Joe and Sam now struck the cement floor they felt as if a house had fallen upon them.

But crawling out of the debris they were for a moment unable to see for the heavy dust.

Coughing and wheezing, Payton was the first to find his voice. He set up an outcry:

"Pull us out, comrades! Give us a hand! I say, don't leave us down here!"

There would have been a ready response to this, but Joe Spotswood now caught sight of something through the dust which gave him a thrill.

It was a blue uniform and against the cellar wall he saw a number of crouching figures. In an instant he cried:

"Shut up your trap, Sam! Here's a whole parcel of Yanks in this cellar. Look out they don't jump on us!"

"Yanks!" gasped Sam, staring about him. Then he saw the figures of the fugitives crouching against the cellar wall. At once he let out a louder yell than ever.

"Help! comrades, there's a lot of Yankees hiding down here! Come down, a lot of you, and help us capture 'em!"

That this announcement created a sensation can easily be imagined. In an instant a dozen boys in gray had leaped down into the cellar to join Sam and Joe.

Then one of the fugitive Yankees put up his hand, crying:

"All right, Johnnies! Don't shoot! We surrender!"

"Surrender!" screamed Payton. "I should say you would! Where did you come from? How did you get here? What are you doing here? How long have you been here?"

"Oh, say, Sam!" cried Spotswood. "Give the poor chaps a chance to answer. Better yet let 'em answer the captain. We'll just march 'em upstairs."

"We're willing to go," said the spokesman of the captured Yankees. "But you'll have to show us the way out."

"What!" exclaimed Spotswood. "Isn't there a way out?"

"If there had been, we'd been out of here long ago."

This was astonishing.

"In the name of wonder, how did you ever get in here then?" asked Joe.

"You see, we were chased by some of your cavalry. We lost our regiment while out foraging and your cavalry chased us. We ran in here and tried to find a hiding place. One of us saw a crack in the floor, and lifting a board we dropped down in here. We found there was no way to get out and we've been here a day and night, not daring to go out the way we came, for a lot of you fellows have been up there all the time."

This was full explanation. It struck the boys as ludicrous and they laughed.

"Too bad, Yanks! You dropped right into a trap."

"Only for that dance though they'd have slipped us," cried Sam Payton. "Oh, we've made a good haul this time. It's you and I Spotswood. We ought to get promotion for this."

CHAPTER VI.

THE YANKEE PRISONERS.

"Promoted be hanged!" rejoined Joe. "I am satisfied with my own job. I'd rather be orderly sergeant of the Virginia Grays than adjutant to General Lee. That's the truth."

"Probably you could fill the position better," suggested Sam. "As for myself I expect to wear a lieutenant-general's straps yet."

Thus badgering and jollying the Grays got their prisoners up out of the cellar by means of an improvised ladder. Once above, the six fugitives were fully revealed in the light of day.

There was one officer among them, a sergeant. He was the spokesman.

Will and Fred now came up and listened with surprise to the tale of the discovery of the fugitives.

At once the young captain proceeded to catechise the Union sergeant.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Bill Ware!" was the reply.

"What is your regiment?"

"The Connecticut Volunteers!"

"Oh! did you belong to Percival's Brigade?"

"Yes."

"How came you here?"

With this Ware told of his foraging expedition and its disastrous results. Will listened with interest.

"Now, Ware," he said, "we are on a scouting trip. We don't want prisoners. We can't feed you, nor we can't take you back to our lines. But we can keep you here a long time, and we could, if we chose, shoot you as suspected

spies. You can save your lives and gain your liberty by doing me a favor."

Ware's eyes opened with interest.

"All right, captain," he said. "Whatever you say, I'll do."

"That's good. I want you to tell me what the communications are north of Fredericksburg. Tell me the truth."

"That's easy," replied Ware. "They are by rail."

"Then the railroad is in operation still?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Is there any heavy Union force north of Fredericksburg?"

"The whole of Pope's army."

"Ah! then he has not withdrawn any of it to send to McClellan's relief?"

"I should say not," replied Ware in surprise. "General Pope ain't ready to move yet. He is lying low and waiting for the right chance. When he does strike out all you Johnnies want to look sharp."

Will smiled and replied:

"Your warning is fully appreciated. We shall certainly look sharp. But I don't fancy he will get so near to Richmond as your boasted McClellan has."

"Humph!" said Ware. "McClellan could have gone into Richmond if he had been a bit quicker."

"He would have come out again," said Will emphatically. "And a great deal faster than he went in. I can tell you that."

"Perhaps so!"

"Now, my man, what division of the army is west of us at this moment?"

Ware squinted his eyes in thought.

"Henry's Brigade," he said. "Then there is Cox with three thousand men over to the Forks. Van Dusen with another brigade just beyond him. For that matter there are companies and regiments and brigades of Union soldiers all through this part of Virginia."

Will was ready to believe that the fellow told the truth. There was no reason whatever to doubt him.

"You can see the extent of our force," said Will. "Tell me truthfully what do you think of our present position?"

Ware squinted again.

"Shall I tell you?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's too durned risky. If I was you, I'd make back tracks toward Richmond."

Will Prentiss smiled as he noted the serious earnestness of the man. He realized though that he was right.

"I believe you, Ware," he said. "And I am seriously considering that question at this moment. Yet, I have a great desire to go as near Fredericksburg as I can and learn about the fortifications."

"Do you really desire that?" asked Ware eagerly.

"I can say that I do."

"That settles it. You hit the right mate this time. If you'll come with me I'll take you into Fredericksburg safely and send you out just the same. You shall stand no risk."

"What assurance do I have that you will not betray me

and turn me over to the guard the moment we are within the Union lines?"

"My word, and I never broke it in my life," said Ware earnestly.

"I will consider your proposition," said Will thoughtfully. "I hardly think I can accept it though."

The prisoners were placed under guard at the lower end of the church. The Grays dispersed. Some planks were thrown across the aperture in the floor.

As Will turned to the door to see again if there was any lessening of the storm he met Clements.

The scout had a quizzical smile upon his face as he asked:

"Well, Captain Prentiss, are you going to accept that fellow's invitation to enter the Union lines?"

"I have not decided."

"You cannot possibly mean to even consider it."

"Why?"

"I can tell you why. You would simply walk right into a trap. You would never come out again."

"The fellow seemed earnest and sincere."

"But he is a Yankee and a foe. Do not forget that."

"Well, I have abandoned the project," said Will. "But I would dearly like to take an expedition into the enemy's lines."

The scout shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you mean that?"

"I do."

"Then you shall have the privilege. Let me tell you that I have the means of getting into Fredericksburg. If you will don one of the blue uniforms of those prisoners over there we will try it. We can ride down there in a short time and ought to be back here in thirty-six hours."

The idea caught Will on the instant.

"Do you really think it can be done?"

"I know it."

The young captain was not long in making up his mind. He consulted with Fred Randolph.

"You are to remain here with the Grays until I return," he said. "Keep a strong guard posted. Reconnoiter and send out scouts every hour. Do not allow yourself to be surprised by the foe. I think you will be safe here."

"I think so," agreed Fred. "At any rate if we are threatened I will at once change our position. We will not be caught napping. Will you go alone?"

"I shall take one man, Spotswood, with me. I only want to remain inside their lines long enough to get a look at their fortifications. I shall then return with the Grays and report to General Lee. We will have fulfilled our mission."

"Good! I wish I was going with you."

"It is better that you should remain here with the company."

"Yes, I agree with you. When will you start?" asked Fred.

"Within the hour."

"One moment!"

"Well?"

"What about the young woman, Miss Cameron? Is she to remain with us?"

Before Will could answer the young nurse was seen approaching. She bowed and Will and Fred lifted their hats.

"Captain Prentiss," said Edith, "I come to thank you for all you have done for me. I am about to go on my way."

"Indeed, Miss Cameron," said Will, "if it is not rude may I ask why you leave us?"

"I have stern duties before me. I must not linger here. It is my intention to devote the remainder of my life to the holy calling of nurse in army and hospital. I hope to do much good there and so find peace and a measure of happiness."

"I wish you all success," said Will, "but you cannot be going now? The storm is very severe."

"I shall not mind that, for I have a poncho and my horse will carry me into our lines at Richmond. Again I must thank you and wish you good-bye."

"You cannot go alone," protested Will. "The country is full of perils. You might encounter Delaplaine. I will send a detail with you."

"No!" she said firmly. "I have no fear. I have weapons and plenty of resource. If Delaplaine blocks my path I will shoot him as I would a dog and cast myself upon God's mercy."

Will's remonstrance was in vain. A few moments later, wrapped in her poncho, the young nurse rode away into the storm. When Will saw her next it was under totally different circumstances.

But the young captain had fully resolved upon his Fredericksburg expedition. He quickly made himself ready.

With the Union prisoners there had been captured a couple of long blue overcoats. One of these Will put on, buttoning it up. It concealed his uniform absolutely.

His boots reached above the hem of the coat so that no part of the gray uniform was visible.

Joe Spotswood, who was delighted with the prospect ahead of him, donned the other overcoat.

They borrowed a couple of fatigue caps from the prisoners in blue. All this had been accomplished before a startling fact was learned.

It occurred to Will that he would like more conversation with Bill Ware. He looked for the big prisoner, but to his sheer amazement he was not to be seen.

Bill Ware had disappeared. The most assiduous search revealed only the fact that he had escaped in some unknown and mysterious manner.

Will was angry and disgruntled. He censured the guard heavily and caused the vicinity to be thoroughly searched. But Bill Ware was gone.

There was nothing left but to make the best of it. Will went on with his preparations just the same.

A short while later the three, Clements, Spotswood and Will Prentiss, rode away on horseback. There had been two horses with the Grays and the third was the animal which had belonged to Benton Brough.

Clements took the lead and galloped on at a rapid gait. That ride to Fredericksburg in the rain was not soon forgotten. When they arrived within easy distance of the town, Will dismounted. The others did the same.

The horses were tethered and Will turning to his comrades said:

"We have played in luck so far, boys. We have not run up against any of the foe."

"That is right," agreed Clements. "But we cannot expect to have that good fortune right along."

"You think our horses ought to be all safe here, don't you?"

"No!" replied Clements, "they are safe nowhere. In this region traversed continually by the foe, they may be discovered at any moment. We are taking chances on that."

CHAPTER VII.

THROUGH THE LINE.

Leaving the horses the little party now led the way down through a grove of dense oaks to the highway. Here Clements paused and listened a while.

They now donned their blue overcoats and fatigue caps.

They would pass easily for a Union detail, Will acting as officer. In this way they walked on down the Fredericksburg road.

The rain had ceased somewhat but the mud was appalling.

They floundered along slowly. The day was drawing to a close and it became doubtful whether they would be able to enter the Union lines before dark.

Clements, who had a pass, now gave it to Will saying:

"You are officer of this detail. If you meet a guard make a good bluff. They have got to pass us."

"All right!" agreed the boy-captain.

Just then the thud of horses' hoofs was heard with the rattle of accoutrements. Around a bend in the road dashed a squad of Union cavalry.

The three Confederates were now up against it.

"Halt!" cried the officer of the cavalry squad. "What have we here? Stragglers, eh? What are you chaps doing here?"

"Don't hold us up," said Will sharply. "We are on detail duty and must get back to Fredericksburg at once."

"Oh, you are, eh?" said the cavalry officer suspiciously. "What's your regiment?"

"That's nothing to you," retorted Will, putting up a good bluff. "Don't hinder us or there'll be trouble."

"Forward on the right there, men. Close in. I believe we have a gang of spies here. Let us see about it."

The cavalry major reined his horse nearer, and for a moment seemed about to dismount. But a glance at the mud caused him to hesitate.

The three daring Confederates were cool and unconcerned.

"See here!" cried Will. "Every moment you delay us makes it so much worse for you, for we'll certainly report you to General Pope."

"Oh! General Pope detailed you, did he?"

"He did."

"When did he detail you?"

For an instant Will Prentiss was stumped. He knew that all depended upon a logical answer. A failure now might be disastrous.

He had heard the day previous that Pope had gone to Washington. He at once made answer:

"Two days ago. Now I don't propose to answer any more questions. Here is our pass countersigned by Pope himself. You had better ride on."

The cavalry major gave a start and his manner changed. He glanced at the pass which Will held up.

He saluted and cried:

"Pardon my delaying you. Attention! Fours right! Gallop!"

The squad dashed away. Will drew a breath of relief.

"Well," said Clements, "you played your game well, Will. You fooled him."

Joe Spotswood drew his hand out from the bosom of his overcoat. It held an enormous pistol.

"I was ready," he said. "I had that major marked and four of his men. You bet if they had got us they would have paid the price."

At this Will and Clements laughed.

"You are a good rough and ready comrade, Spotswood," said the scout. "You are a good man to travel with."

They now walked on. As they neared Fredericksburg the clouds began to lift and the sun shone in a yellow western sky.

"The rain is over," said Clements.

"I am glad," declared Will.

"It looks as if we would not get into Fredericksburg before dark. Little can be done to-night."

"It means a stay overnight in the place," said Clements.

"That is too bad," said Will disappointedly. "The risk will be something."

"So it will. But we have no other way. It must be done."

Just then a vidette approached them. He did not halt them, simply giving them a sharp look and saluting.

Then they kept on. They now came out upon a little height from whence the town could be seen. The lines of fortifications seemed to surround the place, but were heavier on the southerly side.

Union pickets were visible pacing up and down before the redoubts. The young Confederate spies were looking at the scene with interest when suddenly from the bushes by the roadside burst a sergeant and guard.

"Halt!" he cried. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"We are a detail under orders from General Pope," replied Will. "We are just returning to headquarters."

"General Pope? He has left Fredericksburg."

"We know that. We shall wait for his return to report."

"That's a likely story. I believe you are a parcel of spies. What have you got under that coat?"

It was a critical moment. The least weakness on Will's part now would have been fatal.

Of course the boys had on their Confederate uniforms under their coats. They would have been betrayed at once.

The boy-captain's presence of mind, however, once again won the day.

Quick as a flash he retorted:

"I'll show you what I've got under my coat, you hog-faced salamander! That's what I've got. Now stop me, if you dare."

Will flaunted the pass in the sergeant's face. He examined it critically. Then he saluted and said:

"All right, boys! Pass on! There's a lot of spies around here and we're on the lookout for 'em."

"Be sure you hold up the right ones next time," growled Will.

They marched on. The sergeant and his guard went back into the bushes.

"Ugh! another close call," said Clements.

"I shiver to think of what our fate would be without this pass," said Will.

Again Spotswood displayed his pistol.

"I was all primed," he said. "It would have taken me just one minute to have winged that sergeant. I guess we could have stopped the rest of 'em."

"Now come the picket guards," said Will. "That is the rub."

"They will be easy enough to pass."

"Suppose some pig-headed sergeant though took it into his head to arrest and search us."

"I don't think that he would," said Clements. "I have passed through the lines here many a time with that pass."

"All right!" agreed Will. "So far we have done well."

Down the highway they went and every moment drew nearer the fortifications. They came first to a heavy battery on the right.

In an instant the picket cried:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Friends!" was Will's reply.

"Advance, friends, with the countersign."

Will drew his pass out and extended it to the picket. The fellow glanced at it and sung out:

"Corporal of the guard!"

In a few moments the corporal and his guard appeared. He was a fat, stuffy fellow, with a pompous manner. He took the pass and read it.

"It ain't reg'lar!" he said. "Give the countersign or stay outside the lines."

By great good fortune Will saw that he held the pass upside down and at once divined the pompous corporal's reason for declaring the pass irregular.

Will smiled and said:

"Pardon me, but I want to tell you that that pass is regular and countersigned by General Pope. The fact that you cannot read it does not make it irregular or useless."

The corporal's face flushed crimson. He glared at Will in a crestfallen and angry way.

"I kin read it," he said, "and I tell ye it ain't regular."

"See here," said Clements. "You detain us at your peril, corporal. You know you can't read it. Let one of your men here read it."

"Give the countersign!" growled the obdurate corporal.

"That's all the authority I have to let anyone pass in. How do I know but ye're spies?"

"I give you one more chance," said Clements, "if not, I shall go to the next post. No doubt they have a corporal there who can read."

The fat corporal hesitated a moment. He was beaten and humiliated. But there was no other way.

"Read that thing, Bill," he said. "I don't know Pope's signature. Is it all right?"

The private to whom the pass was given read:

"Pass the bearer and companions through the lines at any time without question or hindrance. By order,

"JOHN A. POPE, Major-General."

"It is all regular, corporal," said the private. "Better let 'em pass."

The corporal stepped back and saluted. The three spies passed in. It was a queer sensation which came over Will Prentiss now.

He was within the Union lines.

He was acting in the capacity of a spy. All that was between him and betrayal was the blue overcoat.

A glance beneath that would have showed his uniform and the result of exposure was frightful to contemplate. Death would be certain.

But the young captain of the Grays had plenty of nerve.

It was not his way to shrink in the face of danger. He was possessed of just that spirit of daring to rather court it. Into the Union camp they walked.

They passed between the lines of trenches and down the avenues of tents. The streets of the town were just beyond.

The three spies kept their eyes open as they went on.

They were hardly noticed, for there were thousands of their type on all sides. They were really almost as safe as if in their own camp so far as the possibility of discovery went.

"On my word," said Will Prentiss, "they have powerful fortifications here. It will be no joke to force them."

"You are right," agreed Clements. "You can see what General Lee will have to face."

"We can do it," said Spotswood. "Why, Longstreet's men would carry these intrenchments at the first jump."

But Will shook his head.

"I can't believe that," he said. "The more I see of the Union forces the better satisfied I am that this will be a long and bloody war."

"You are right, Captain Prentiss," said Clements. "Our people of the South have made a great mistake in underestimating the fighting capacity of the Yankees. They will not be so easily vanquished."

CHAPTER VIII.

AMID DANGERS.

The shadows of night were now rapidly falling. As Will saw that it was not possible to take in all the fortifications before dark he felt that his purpose would be defeated unless they remained overnight.

He imparted this belief to Clements.

"Of course, now that you are in the lines it would be extremely foolish to go back without the information you came for," said the scout.

"Just so."

"Then we must remain here until morning. We can then return in safety to the church."

"Very good," said Joe Spotswood, "but where shall we find shelter? Will we sleep on the wet ground?"

"Joe is looking for a soft bed," laughed Clements. "Don't you worry, sergeant. You will be well cared for."

"I hope so," said Spotswood. "As I grow older my bones feel the dampness."

At this all laughed, for Joe was barely twenty years old and the picture of health.

However, the scout now left the fortifications and entered the city. Fredericksburg, in 1862, was a typical Virginia town, with muddy streets overhung by shade trees, brick houses with wide hospitable porches and a tavern and stores.

To find quarters at the tavern would have been hardly wise. Their appearance in the place, when it was to be assumed that they belonged to a regiment near there, might have excited interest and suspicion.

So Clements said:

"There is a little place in one of these side streets kept by a friend of mine who knows that I am a spy. It is a sort of lodging house. I think we can find safe quarters there."

"Very good!" agreed Will. "We are wet and tired. Any place that will give us a comfortable bed and something to eat will be all right."

They turned into the side street. In a few moments the scout paused before a dwelling, along the front of which extended a wide porch.

Clements rapped on the door and a negro servant appeared. The scout asked:

"Is Mr. Barksdale in?"

"Yes, sah," replied the negro. "Will yo' cum in, sah?"

Clements and the boys entered the house. In a small sitting-room they found seats. It was hardly a minute before a portly figure appeared in the door.

"Hello, Barksdale!" exclaimed the scout. "You see I have returned."

"Clements!" exclaimed the keeper of the lodging house. "I am glad to see you. Do you bring good news?"

"I think so. At least I have brought a couple of friends."

The scout introduced Will and the young orderly sergeant. The lodging-house keeper stared at them.

"Bless me!" he gasped, speaking in a half whisper. "Are you Jeff Prentiss' boy? Why, I know your father well."

"I am his son," replied Will.

"Don't you think it risky coming here? How the deuce did you 'uns get here? Why, this town is surrounded and all eat up with the Yankees."

"We found our way through," said Clements. "We are getting information for General Lee."

"Well," declared Barksdale. "You can be sure I am durned glad to see you. How is our army?"

"Fine and fit to fight," replied Clements. "We are going to march through Maryland next."

"Good! I hope Lee will march right into the Yankee capital."

"I think he will. You'll see some sharp work in a few weeks."

"Well, gentlemen, all I have is at your disposal. We're not living high, nowadays. You see their adjutant here learned that I was a Southern partisan and he quartered a couple of his officers on me. Oh, we 'uns will get square with them durned Yankees some day!"

Barksdale now proved his good intentions by showing his guests to a room which had two beds in it.

"You 'uns had better not come down to supper," he said. "I'll send it up to you. It'll be safer."

"Very good!" said Will, throwing off his overcoat. "On the whole, I think it will, so long as I am still in gray."

Barksdale gave a start and his gaze kindled as he saw the handsome gray uniform of the young captain.

"Hang me!" he exclaimed. "Ye're as handsome as a picture. I've got so sick of blue backs that it's good to see a handsome lad in gray."

"You'll see plenty of 'em in Fredericksburg before long," declared Clements. "Lee will drive the Yanks out of here in quick order."

"I hope so!" cried Barksdale. "I want to see our own boys here. Well, gentlemen, I'll send you up something to eat and then I'll——"

He did not finish the sentence. A step sounded in the corridor and a figure passed the open door. In the dim light it could hardly be distinguished, but Will knew that it was some one who wore spurs.

For a moment all stood aghast. The landlord quickly closed the door. His face was chalk white.

"That is one of them Yankee officers," he said. "If he looked in here he would have seen you in your uniform."

Will was for a moment appalled.

Clements had sprung up quivering with anxiety and excitement.

"If he saw you, then we are lost, unless we get out of here at once," he whispered.

"I don't believe he saw the captain," declared Spotswood. "I stood right before him. I don't think the Yankee looked in at all."

Clements rushed to the window and glanced down into the street.

He saw the officer leisurely saunter down the porch, light a cigar and stroll as leisurely away into the gloom.

The scout's suspicions were disarmed.

"I think it's all right," he said. "He very likely did not see the color of your uniform in the dim light. If he did he did not suspect you as being a Confederate. If he had, he would hardly act the way he has. He would quickly call the guard."

"That is so," agreed Will with a breath of relief. "Still I think we would be doubly safe to change quarters."

"There is another lodging house at the end of the street," said Barksdale. "I can send you 'uns there."

"No!" said Clements with conviction. "I think we are safe here. Send us up something to eat, Barksdale, and all will be well."

"All right," said the landlord, and he disappeared. In a short time the negro servant appeared with an appetizing repast which he spread on a table.

It is hardly necessary to say that the three spies fell to with a zest. They were ravenously hungry.

"Great Cæsar!" exclaimed Spotswood. "I haven't had anything like this since the days before the war. It is a great surprise to a man's stomach!"

"Eat all you can," adjured the scout. "If fate should consign us to a Yankee prison we shall need it."

"That is true," agreed Will. "Hello! What is that?"

In an instant all were upon their feet. With blanched faces they regarded each other. Startling sounds came up from the street.

The tramp of horses' feet on the pavements was followed by the clatter of arms and the ring of sharp spoken orders.

"Company, halt! Sergeant, take a guard and bring the confounded rebel spy down out of there. If he offers resistance, shoot him!"

Every word was plainly heard by all in the room.

Will Prentiss in an instant had wrapped the blue overcoat about him and sprung to the room door.

But at the threshold he met Barksdale, whose face was ghastly white.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"They are after us! We are betrayed!" gasped Will. "We must get out by some back way."

"Don't lose your nerve! Keep cool!" said the landlord. "It may not be you they're after. It's not this house they are entering."

"What!" exclaimed Spotswood. "Is it the next house?"

"Yes."

"Then there must be one of our patriots in there. I wish we could help him."

"It is impossible. But keep cool. If they have mistaken the house and come here, I will find you a safe exit by the rear. Keep cool!"

"Yes," said Clements, who was peering through the window blinds. "It's the next house and they have the poor fellow."

Will and Spotswood now joined Clements. The scene they witnessed was a most thrilling one.

Lines of Union soldiers were drawn up on either side of the house entrance. Down the steps marched a guard. Between them was a bareheaded civilian.

He was forced into the street behind a line of bayonets and marched away into the gloom. Drawing a deep breath, Will exclaimed:

"Poor chap! that is all there is of him now. They will shoot him at sunrise."

"Yes," said Clements, "the ultimate fate of a spy's death. I happen to know that poor fellow. His name is Corbin."

"Well," said Spotswood, "it means one thing for us, we are not yet suspected."

"No," agreed Clements, "but our turn may come next."

"We won't borrow trouble."

"By no means."

Barksdale, much reassured, now left the room again. Will and Spotswood cast themselves upon the bed.

"I am tired enough to go to sleep standing up," said the young captain. "I believe I'll embrace this opportunity to try it lying down on a real bed."

The others laughed.

"That's all right," said Clements. "You fellows may enjoy yourselves. I have a little business to do in the town and will return later."

"Are you going out?"

"Just for an hour or so."

"All right," said Will with a yawn. "You'll find us in the arms of Morpheus when you return."

Neither Will nor Joe removed their uniforms. They were fast asleep in a very few moments.

Clements left the room and in a few moments was in the street. The scout had a purpose in going out.

He was not altogether satisfied that the officer who had passed their door had not seen Will's uniform and had not reported the fact to the provost-marshal.

At any moment another provost-guard might appear in front of Barksdale's house and pull the two spies out of bed.

Clements knew where the provost-marshal's quarters were. He went thither to ascertain, if possible, if any move of the sort was on foot.

He did not dream of getting into trouble himself and was therefore quite startled when he heard a voice, coarse and profane, behind him:

"He's the chap I saw in the church! I'll swear it, sergeant! Capture him!"

Clements had not even turned his head to see who had spoken. But he had recognized the voice and knew that he was in deadly peril.

The voice was that of Bill Ware, the escaped Union prisoner, who had been captured in the cellar of the old church.

With him was a sergeant and several soldiers of the provost-guard. There was not one instant to lose.

Clements was like a fox, quick of scent and quick of action. Without an instant's waiting he acted.

At his right was a dark alley. Swift as a shadow he threw a lightning-like handspring into the gloom.

As he did so he fell on his face. This was the saving of his life, for the bullets sent after him passed over him, leaving him safe.

Clements ran like a deer into the depths of the alley. He could hear his pursuers.

CHAPTER IX.

THRILLING INCIDENTS.

Clements, however, quickly doubled on his pursuers and emerged into another street safely.

Fredericksburg was familiar to him and he was easily

able to pick his way back to the street from which he had first come.

It was the scout's purpose to return and carry warning to Will and Joe.

He realized that their presence in Fredericksburg would now be known and it would be almost impossible for them to hide from the lynx eyes of the provost-guard.

Their only hope now was to get out of the town instantly and before the picket guards could be warned of their purpose, and instructed to hold them up.

Clements quickly stole along in the shadows until he again reached Barksdale's.

He passed many soldiers on the way. None, however, had attempted to detain him.

Clements quickly entered Barksdale's house. As he stepped inside the door he came to a startled halt.

Voices reached his ear. It was the words which enchaind his attention and held him with a deep thrill.

"Barksdale, who are those men who came here to-day?" was a brusque inquiry. Clements through the crack of a doorway saw the landlord facing a tall officer who wore a colonel's straps.

"Law me, Colonel Ford, I don't know who they are. I reckon its some of you uns' own soldiers."

"Oh, they are soldiers, eh?"

"Yes."

"Are they officers?"

"I don't know, sir. I suppose they are."

"Well, if they are not above the rank of lieutenant they should be in bivouac with their regiment. I think I'll pay them a call. I understand spies have been coming into our lines right along in our soldiers' uniforms. If they wear the uniform of privates they are spies, for no private is allowed to quarter in the town."

"Oh—I—I—don't think they are, colonel," stammered Barksdale unfortunately. "I—I think one of them said he was a general."

"A general? In this house? Preposterous! You act strange, Barksdale! Out with the truth now or I'll hang you up by your thumbs. You know these men."

"I swear to you I don't," protested Barksdale, driven to the extreme of falsification. "They are strangers to me, colonel. I'll order them out in the morning."

"Hardly!" said the colonel. "I'll call the provost-guard and have them questioned."

"Not to-night," said a voice behind the Union colonel. Strong fingers closed about his windpipe and he was bent over backwards into a powerful embrace.

It was Clements who had accepted a daring chance, for he knew that the Union colonel's suspicions were thoroughly aroused and he would do just what he had threatened to do.

Of course he could not speak and he struggled in vain.

"Quick!" said Clements sharply. "Gag him, Barksdale, before I shut off his wind entirely. Cease your struggles, my fine friend or I'll have to knock you into insensibility."

Barksdale put up his hands.

"I'm ruined! I'm ruined!" he gasped.

"Shut up, you fool!" cried Clements angrily. "We'll have the whole Union Army down on us! Get me some rope!"

Barksdale, seeing that there was no alternative, hastened to comply. He procured a strong rope and with this they bound the Union colonel's hands and feet. He was cleverly gagged and seated in a chair.

"Now, Barksdale," said Clements, taking a pistol from the colonel's holster, "keep your eye on him until I return. I will be back quickly."

Barksdale, who was the color of ashes and all aquiver, complied. Clements flew up the stairs and burst into the room where Will and Joe were still fast asleep.

The noise of his entrance awakened them and they sprang up instantly.

"What's the matter?" cried Will as he sprang for his sword. "You are pale as a ghost, Clements."

"Well, I ought to be," cried the scout. "We are betrayed."

"Betrayed?"

"Yes! there is not a moment to lose. In half an hour's time Fredericksburg won't hold us."

Will placed a firm hand on the scout's wrist. He said firmly:

"Calm yourself, Clements. I never saw you like this before. This is not a time for unstringing of nerves."

The scout drew a deep breath.

"You are right, Prentiss," he said. "I am all unstrung. Well, let us be cool, but let us act quickly."

"We are all ready to do what you propose."

"Put on those blue overcoats, quick! We have got to get outside the lines the quickest possible way."

"All right!" Will and Joe complied. But the young captain asked:

"What has happened?"

With this Clements told of his encounter with Bill Ware. Also of the affair below stairs with Colonel Ford.

"That settles it," cried Will. "I can see that we have got to get out of here at once to save our necks."

Quickly the three spies made their way below stairs. Barksdale still held vigil over the Union colonel.

"Barksdale," said Clements, "on account of urgent business we have got to leave Fredericksburg on the instant. We will leave the prisoner in your hands, but don't release him under an hour."

"Jemima!" gasped the landlord. "Do you 'uns think that I am going to stay here to be hanged, too? My game is up as well as yours. I've got to get out of this town the same as you."

"That shows your good sense," said Clements. "I advise you to do so. It's not a healthy place in Fredericksburg for loyal sons of the Bonnie Blue Flag."

The Union colonel glared at them and writhed in his bonds. But he was helpless.

"I am going with you 'uns," declared Barksdale. "Wait for me."

So as the three spies slipped out of the house, Barksdale accompanied them. Down the street they went in the darkness at a rapid walk.

It is possible that all might have gone well, and they might have got safely beyond the lines, but for Barksdale.

They turned a corner into another street which led toward the fortifications and the outer picket guard. Will felt for his pass, so that if questioned, he could produce it.

Suddenly though a tall figure stepped from a doorway. He nearly collided with Clements. At sight of him Barksdale stopped.

The landlord lost his head in that moment. The tall figure was that of the other officer who lodged at his house and whose name was Lieutenant Wendell.

In the landlord's distorted fancy Wendell had appeared on the spot to head them off, fully cognizant of their purpose to leave the town. Of course this was not so, but Barksdale lost his nerve and yelled:

"Get out, boys! Run quick! All is lost!"

Wendell paused before the terrified landlord in surprise. Instead of dashing away Clements and the boys turned in amazement.

"Barksdale!" cried the Union lieutenant. "It's you, is it? What's all this? What are you doing? Getting out of town, eh? Whom have you here?"

There was a quick note of suspicion in Wendell's voice. Even at that late moment Barksdale could have hedged had he possessed sufficient presence of mind.

Will Prentiss attempted to do it for him.

"It's all right, lieutenant," he said. "We have impressed Barksdale to go down to our regiment and roast a pig for us. You know he is a fine cook!"

"Oh!" said Wendell, his suspicion beginning to vanish. "I see how it is. Well, good luck to you. Wish I could join you, but I can't. Hello! What ails you, Barksdale? Are you sick or scared?"

The landlord was shivering and gasping like one with the ague. Fear was in every line of his cowardly face.

"Oh, I—can't do it," he muttered. "I'll be hung! I know I will! Oh! spare my life!"

"Fool!" gritted Clements under his breath. The mischief was done. Wendell, who had almost been put aside, was now more suspicious than ever.

"There's something wrong here and I am going to know what it is," he said sternly. "Out with it, Barksdale! See here! What regiment do you men belong to? Tell me that!"

At a venture Will replied:

"The Connecticut Volunteers."

This was the name of the regiment given by Bill Ware. The lieutenant gave a start and said:

"You are on your way back to your regiment?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry," said Wendell. "But you are going the wrong way. The Connecticut regiment is on the other side of the town. I believe you are lying. Unbutton those overcoats and let me see your insignia of company."

The critical moment had arrived.

It was now a case of do or die. The cowardice of Barksdale was responsible for all their trouble.

Clements acted with lightning decision.

"Look!" he cried, pointing down the street. "We can decide the question now. Here comes the provost-guard!"

Wendell turned his head. Slight as the move was it gave the scout time to act.

He hurled himself upon the Union officer and dashed him senseless to the pavement. He went down like a log.

CHAPTER X.

BEHIND BARS.

Clements leaped over the prostrate figure of the Union lieutenant.

"Quick, boys!" he cried. "We've got to reach the picket line in two minutes. The whole town will be after us."

The three spies, leaving Barksdale still convulsed with fear, sped like deer down the dark street.

They passed a squad of soldiers who had been out on a midnight lark. They ran on into the gloom now, and the outskirts of the town were reached.

The picket line was not far distant.

The framing breastworks were upon either side. They must pass between them. Suddenly a guard stood in their path with lowered bayonet.

"Halt!"

They came to a stop.

At the moment Clements was tempted to try to force the guard. But he knew that this would inaugurate a pursuit and there might be an outpost beyond.

So Will said:

"It's all right, guard. We're going out."

"Not to-night."

"What!"

"I have orders to allow no one to pass out of the lines to-night."

"Oh, well, that's all right!" said Will. "But I have something here which will induce you to let us pass."

With this he produced the pass. The guard lit a match and read it. He handed it back to Will.

"I shall have to call the sergeant of the guard," he said. "I'll only detain you a moment."

"Hurry up, for we are in haste."

"Sergeant of the guard!" shouted the picket. "Post number twenty-four, call sergeant of the guard."

The next picket took up the cry.

"Post twenty-four! Sergeant of the guard!"

In an instant there was a rattle of muskets and a score of soldiers rushed out of the gloom. Their bayonets glittered in the light of the sergeant's lantern.

"What is it, picket?" he asked.

"Here are the men with the pass," said the picket. "I have stopped them."

The sergeant stepped forward.

"Let's see your pass," he said, flashing the light into the boys' faces. Will gave him the pass.

"You will see that it bears General Pope's autograph," he said. "We are on special work for him."

"Yes, I see," said the sergeant, pocketing the pass. In that instant Will Prentiss saw that they were lost.

"I have received orders to halt and place under arrest anyone trying to leave the lines to-night with a pass like this. You answer the description to a dot. You are under arrest."

"There is a mistake," said Clements. "I will show you."

"There is no mistake," said the sergeant. "You're a lot of rebel spies. To-morrow you will make a good target for our rank and file."

"This is preposterous!" cried Will. "I demand that you let us pass! You shall pay for this blunder."

"Maybe!" chuckled the sergeant. "I'll be more sure of promotion. Fall in! Forward, march!"

With the bayonets pricking their backs the three spies were compelled to march ignominiously back into the town. It was indeed a hard predicament.

Will Prentiss saw all his plans mouldering. Captured as a spy in Fredericksburg he could hardly hope to ever see his comrades of the Grays again.

His heart sank dismally.

Not that he feared death. He would face it unflinchingly and at any time. But the disgrace of being shot as a spy was not pleasant to contemplate.

Back into the streets of Fredericksburg they were marched. When just within the town the guard halted.

They could go no further. The provost-guard must here relieve them of the prisoners.

In a few moments it came running up. The prisoners were taken in charge by them and the march was resumed.

In Fredericksburg stood the old stone prison, which was afterwards destroyed. It had barred windows high from the ground and seemed a veritable Bastille.

Into this the prisoners were marched. Here they were thrust into a cell.

The provost-guard marched away while the warden turned the key and they were left to their own devices.

Behind prison bars in Fredericksburg!

It was an appalling outlook. Yet not one of the trio but kept his nerve. The scout was even jocular.

"Well," he said with a shrug, "they treat us with distinction, not to bind and gag us and leave us to sleep out on the ground. That is something."

"You are right," agreed Will. "Really these are not bad quarters."

"They are not so bad but that I would exchange them," said Joe with a sigh. "Life in a cage is not the thing for a bird of freedom like me."

And he proceeded to test the window bars. But they were firm.

From the window it could be seen that the floor of their cell was a little below the level of the ground outside. The lights of the town flashed brightly all around.

But there was a level yard next to the jail. Beyond this were cedars and the grounds of a private estate.

All this Spotswood noted carefully.

For an hour the prisoners remained in the cell. Then a

tall, lantern-jawed man came along, followed by a squad of guards.

He was the provost-marshal. When he brought his trip of inspection to the door of the boys' cell he halted.

"What's this?" he growled. "Three prisoners in one cell? That's against prison orders. Take one of 'em out!"

The turnkey unlocked the cell door. The sergeant's gaze was fixed on Clements. He nodded:

"Fall in!" he said.

Clements hesitated. He looked at the boys and said:

"We must part. We'll meet again. If not here, I hope in Paradise."

"Good-bye, Clements!" said Will. "Keep up a good heart."

"That I will, my boy."

Clements was marched away and incarcerated in another cell. The provost-marshal had gone on to the next cell.

When he had gone and there was no one to be seen in the prison corridor Joe got down on his hands and knees and began to examine the floor.

"What are you doing, Joe?" asked Will.

"I haven't any idea of staying in this place if I can squirm out of it," said the plucky sergeant. "I'm taking a look at this floor. The window bars can't be forced. But there's another way."

"Oh!" said Will in a whisper. "What do you mean, Joe?"

"Do you see these flagstones? The cement is cracked. I believe they can be lifted. Underneath the earth is soft. We can dig our way out of here in a few hours."

Will was skeptical.

"I don't see how it can be done."

"Why, simply pry up the flagstones. Then I have a knife which they didn't find. I can dig out the dirt and you can carry it to the window and throw it out."

"We will be seen."

"Nonsense! We need only work when there is no one in the corridor."

"But you haven't considered the fact that the dirt we throw out will be seen on the outside."

"Not after dark."

"But the next day."

"It ought not to take us more than one night to tunnel out. You see this room is two feet below the surface, or, at least its floor is. The foundation therefore on the inside cannot be two feet deeper than the floor. We can go right under it and right up, about four feet. Two hours' hard work ought to do it. We take up this flag against the wall. We simply dig down to the bottom of the foundation, perhaps three feet. We go under the wall and then follow the wall up. It will take us outside the prison and that is all we want."

Will was thrilled with the possibility, for he saw now that it was wholly practicable. Already Joe was cutting around the flagstone.

He picked out the cement with his knife point. In a few moments the flagstone moved. Inserting his fingers in the crevice Joe applied his strength.

Just then footsteps were heard and Joe slipped the flag back in place.

"If they only give us time," he said. "One more day and night, and we can laugh at them."

"I believe you, Joe," said Will. "Too bad they took Clements away."

"So it is."

Just then several figures were seen coming along the corridor. The tall figure of the provost-marshal loomed up again.

The rays of a lantern were flashed into the boys' cell. They saw a number of guards with the marshal and a face pressed against the bars which was familiar and odious.

"Now, you identify them, do you, Bill Ware?" asked the marshal.

"Sure!" replied the escaped prisoner, for he it was.

"They are the chaps I saw in the old church."

"They are Confederate spies?"

"Yes."

"That settles it. When they are brought before the court you must be there to testify."

"You bet I will."

"I'll bet you will," cried Joe Spotswood, advancing threateningly to Ware. "You are a treacherous scoundrel! Come in here and I'll back it up."

But Ware only grinned.

"The only thing you'll back up will be a wooden overcoat," he said. "And I'll bet you won't even get that."

"No, you can depend on it," said the marshal. "A hole in the ground is all we give spies."

Then they marched away. Will and Joe were left by themselves.

The two boy-soldiers knew that their position was desperate. Before another night they might be sleeping in death.

"Joe!" said Will, "there's no use in putting off things. If we are going to dig that tunnel we've got to do it to-night."

"I don't believe we can finish it."

"Well, it's our only hope."

"If you say the word, we'll get at it."

"I do."

"All right."

At once work began. The flagstone was raised and Joe got down and began to dig. It was slow work.

The dirt was carried in their caps and thrown out through the barred window. Steadily they worked through the night hours.

Both knew what depended upon their exertions. So they delved and dug with all their might.

CHAPTER XI.

DARING WORK.

It was no light task the two soldier boys had assumed. Yet they kept on steadily.

The theory of Joe Spotswood proved to be correct. The inside line of foundation was not two feet below the cell floor.

They dug the tunnel down to this point and then worked under the wall. The digging now became easy, for it was simply a matter of pulling down about four feet in thickness of earth next to the foundation wall.

But the darkness passed and daylight began to flood the cell.

Realizing the danger of being seen by the guard the boys were compelled to suspend work. Weary and almost exhausted, they replaced the flags and then lay down and slept.

They could not have slept an hour when they were aroused by the guard who brought them some bread and broth for breakfast.

The boys were hungry and quickly disposed of it. This was hardly accomplished when they saw a sergeant and half a dozen armed men come down the corridor.

Will, with white face, looked at Joe.

"They are coming for us," he said. "It's all up."

The guard paused before their cell. The door swung open and the sergeant said sternly:

"Fall in!"

The two prisoners obeyed. In another moment they were being marched down the corridor.

In that moment the two young Confederates believed that they were going to their death. They could already see the line of armed soldiers, the grave and the blindfold.

But the guard on leaving the jail marched them across an open space to the court building. Then they knew that they were to have a trial.

Into this building they were marched. But not into the courtroom.

In a small side room at a table sat two officers of the rank of general. One of them a white-bearded man with a not unkindly eye, seemed to be the officer in rank.

He viewed the two prisoners.

"What is this?" he said. "Why, these are only boys. They are not what were pictured to us—cunning, clever men of age and discretion."

"That seems to be true, general," said the other officer, "but they can be dangerous spies just the same."

"I will question them," said the general. Then he asked:

"I see you wear the Confederate uniform. Do you not belong to the Southern Army?"

"We do," replied Will.

"What is your regiment?"

"Our company is independent. We are called the Virginia Grays."

"Oh! I see!" said the Union general thoughtfully. "You are a company of home-guards, fighting in the regular army."

"Perhaps so."

"How did you gain admittance to our lines?"

"By means of a pass, signed by General Pope."

"Oh!" said the general, "is this the pass?"

"It is," replied Will.

"Where did you get it?"

"From one who has been in your service ostensibly loyal, but one of our spies."

"Yes, I see! Why did you come here?"

The general bent forward and looked keenly at Will. The young captain made answer promptly:

"To discover your strength of men and fortifications for General Lee."

"You intended to carry him that information?"

"I did."

"That makes of you a spy," said the white-haired general. "It is a fatal admission for you. Do you know the fate of a spy?"

"Yes, it is death."

"You have spoken truly. Then you do not fear to die?"

"Why should I, when I know that I am giving my life to my country?"

The general groaned. He turned to his companion and said:

"Turner, I don't like to send this boy to his death. He is a splendid type of our American manhood. Ah, this war is all a terrible mistake. We are sinning against each other. The best blood of our united country is being spilled in a sheer criminal manner."

"You are right, General Warden," said the other. "But it is war and we must fight it out. It is the only way to preserve and maintain the Union."

For a time General Warden was silent. He did not again look at the two boys. He drew a paper to him and signed it. Then he handed it to the provost-marshal.

"To-morrow at sunrise," he said curtly, and averted his face. The marshal bowed and turning said:

"Fall in! March!"

The two prisoners were marched out again into the air. When they were once outside Will asked the marshal:

"Is that our death warrant?"

The officer nodded.

"It is," he replied.

No further word was spoken. The boys were marched back to their cell. But their spirits were by no means depressed.

"Under sentence of death," said Joe. "It looks dubious for us, Will, but I believe we will pull out."

"To-night!" averred the young captain. "If we don't complete that tunnel before midnight we are dead slow."

"It will be done."

The boys did not think it best to risk discovery by working on it in the day time. So they waited for night to come.

But they were destined to receive an astounding shock and a setback to their plans. About noon time, when the turnkey brought their dinner, he said:

"The order for your execution has been changed to sunset instead of sunrise. You will be prepared!"

It is hardly necessary to say that the two young Confederates were aghast. It seemed to them as if the world had suddenly grown dark.

When the turnkey had gone, Joe arose with white face and determination.

"We've got to risk it, Will. It's our only hope. We may succeed in getting away in daylight. We will have to run the guard."

"You are right."

At once the two boys began work again on their tunnel. They used the most extreme of caution.

But in spite of this suddenly the corridor door flew open and the provost-guard rushed in.

Through a crack in the door they had been watched and their plot was discovered. The guard quickly unlocked the door of the cell.

It was an awful reflection. The game was up. The chance to escape was lost.

Seeing that they were discovered made Will desperate. As the provost-guard with a shout, burst into the cell, the young Confederate prisoner sprang up and grappled with him, wrenching his musket away from him.

At the same moment Joe Spotswood, standing in the excavation, hurled a rock at the other guards.

It struck the foremost just at the cell entrance and felled him. In an instant Joe rushed forward and seized his musket.

Will had felled the man he had grappled with, and now had his musket. The other members of the provost-guard were rushing to their comrades' assistance.

But the two prisoners rendered desperate and seeing that they were getting the upper hand, acted quickly.

They fired and each shot took effect. One of the guards went down with a bullet in his shoulder. The other collapsed with a bullet in the thigh.

The other two guards fired, but their bullets went wide. There was no time to reload and they started down the corridor to give the alarm.

Will and Joe did not need to be told of the tremendous advantage they had gained and also saw that the two guards must not be allowed to reach the bell tower. A peal of the bell would bring a hundred men to the spot.

So the two prisoners bounded after them. Will overtook his man. The Union guard turned and locked bayonets with him. But Will turned his guard and bringing him to his knees dealt him a blow on the head that took his senses away.

Joe had overtaken his man and felled him with the butt of his musket. It was daring work. The guard had been overwhelmed.

It would seem as if the way for escape was now clear. Yet, both prisoners knew that if they emerged in daylight from the prison in their uniforms of gray they would be spotted and quickly recaptured. What was to be done?

They faced each other, white with excitement and questioning.

"What will we do?" asked Spotswood.

"There is one thing we must do," cried Will. "We must take care of these fellows before they revive or we'll have to fight them all over again."

"That's right."

They proceeded to drag one after another into the cell

they had just left. Then they snapped the lock. When they should revive the guard would be prisoners.

Will had got a bullet through one of his fingers. But he wrapped the wound up and gave it no further heed. Joe had some scratches from the bayonets, but was otherwise all right.

Just then a voice reached them.

"Brave work, boys. Just get the keys from that turnkey and let me out."

It was Clements, the scout.

It is hardly necessary to say that the boys obeyed the injunction. In a few moments the scout was free.

"Hurrah!" cried Joe Spotswood. "We are masters of the situation so far. Oh, if it was only dark!"

"How shall we avail ourselves of this advantage to escape?" asked Will.

The scout looked at their uniforms.

"You will have to change your uniforms," he said. "Take those of a couple of the guards there and I believe we could walk right out of here, openly and safely."

The idea caught Will.

"You are right, Clements," he cried. "Nothing could be better. One of you go up in the tower and look out over the yard. See if there are any other guards about there."

Joe did this, while Will and Clements were relieving a couple of the senseless guards of their uniforms. Joe returned in a few moments, saying:

"There is a sentry at the door. I see nothing of any others."

"Then we have the whole prison guard here," cried Will. Then he looked down the corridor.

At the far end were cells in which were other prisoners. The impulse was upon the boy-captain to release them.

But he saw that this was not practicable or possible. It was not possible that so many prisoners could make their escape and their release would result in the exposure of themselves and the frustration of their own plans of escape.

CHAPTER XII.

A SAFE RETREAT.

It did not take long for the two Grays to don the uniforms of the guard. Their own uniforms they rolled up and prepared to take with them.

Clements was in civilian's dress, so it was assumed that he would be safe. It was now time to act upon their daring resolve.

Only one barrier now seemed between them and liberty. This was the single sentry at the door.

There was no doubt but that he would recognize them at sight and it would mean recapture. How to get by him was the question.

"We must do it," said Clements. "Even if we have to knock him on the head."

"His position is such an exposed one that it will not be easy to do that," put in Spotswood.

"That is true," agreed Will. "But before we do that let us look about the prison. There must be some other exit."

"It would probably be guarded also."

"Well, allow that we could perhaps get away with that guard easier than this one."

"Exactly! Let us lose no time. At any moment some visiting officer may put in an appearance."

The escaping prisoners now made their way along the corridor to stairs, which led down to the lower floor.

They were winding and encircled a rotunda in the middle of the building, the tiers of cells rising in a circle to the roof.

Down the winding stairs they went until they arrived at the ground floor of the prison. The door of the warden's room was open.

He was absent from the jail.

It seemed as if fortune had favored the boys. They passed by the warden's office to the front entrance. The sentry was there, pacing up and down.

One moment they considered the chances of passing him. It was easy to see that this would be a risky job.

From the street beyond they would almost surely be seen. Will turned back and led the way to the rear part of the prison.

Here a door led out into a rear yard. There was a high fence enclosing it and a wicket door in the fence. No guard was at this exit, unless he was outside the fence.

The boys crossed the yard and reached the fence. Will applied his eye to a crack in the door. He could not see nor hear any sign of a guard.

"I believe the coast is clear," he whispered. "This door unlatches from the inside. We have only to slip out and all is over."

Just then a voice, beseeching in its tones, reached them.

"For the love of Heaven, mates, save a poor fellow, sentenced to death. Don't go and leave me. Give me a chance. Unlock my cell door."

Looking up they saw a pale face at the bars of a cell window. The prisoner had become cognizant that they were escaping.

For a moment they hesitated. It was the hardest moment of Will's life. Sympathy and kindly interest demanded that he should turn back and help his fellow countryman.

"Shall we do it?" he whispered, turning to Clements. "It is hard to refuse. I know how I would feel in his place."

"Too late!" exclaimed Clements, "there is an arrival at the front entrance. Listen!"

This was true. The hail of the guard was plainly heard, and the tramp of feet on the stone flagging.

"Too bad, old fellow," said Clements, waving his hand to the forlorn prisoner above. "We can't help you! It is too late!"

A gasping cry of despair came from above. Then Will opened the gate and they passed out into the street.

It was broad daylight and the act required cool daring and nerve. The boys carried muskets which they had taken from the provost-guards.

They were compelled to saunter away leisurely down the street. To all intents and purposes they were simply a couple of Union privates in company with a civilian.

Clements wore the hat which he had procured in the prison well down over his eyes. The company of the two soldiers in blue was a barrier to suspicion.

To have hastened their footsteps at that moment might have attracted notice, and yet, every moment was one of fearful suspense. There was the likelihood of the clangor of the prison bell breaking the silence at any moment. But they walked on and soon turned into another street leading away from the prison.

Here they quickened their pace.

"By jingo, boys!" said Clements, "this is a close pull for us. We'll just about do it, I think. Hello!"

In that very moment the clang of the prison bell arose on the air. It caused everyone on the street to halt.

The alarm sent armed men skurrying from all quarters toward the prison. Troops of soldiers appeared on all sides. There was intense excitement.

Clements and the boys knew their peril well. To be seen walking away from the prison now when the alarm should call them in the other direction was to attract notice.

But still they kept on.

Around the corner dashed a lieutenant and a squad of men.

"Hi, you fellows!" he cried. "Where are you going? Don't you hear the alarm? Fall in with the guard."

"We are on special duty," replied Will. "We can't turn back."

The lieutenant looked at Will suspiciously. For an instant he seemed undecided. Then he dashed away with his men.

"That settles it," said Clements, drawing a deep breath. "It is madness for us to attempt to get out of Fredericksburg by daylight. We have got to wait until dark."

"But in the meantime——"

"Here!" whispered Clements. "I have an idea! This way!"

He stepped aside into an alley. It led into a foul-smelling court with dilapidated dwellings on either side.

They were negro quarters, now almost deserted. But on the steps of one of the cabins sat an old negress.

It seemed that the scout knew her, for she started up at sight of him, exclaiming:

"Massy Lor'! It am Marse Clements."

"Sh! don't betray us, Aunt Dora!" said the scout. "We are in great peril. I want you to help us!"

"Ob co'se I will, Marse Clements," replied the negress. "Wha' kin I do? Yo' wants to hide away somewhar?"

"Yes! Do you know a good place?"

"Yo' jes' come wif me. Mah ole man he hab built a cellar fo' vegetables an' fo' sich stuff dat de Yankees kain't steal it, yo' see? I done put yo' in dar, an' de ole Harry hisself neber fin' yo'!"

"Good for you, Aunt Dora!" exclaimed Clements, thrusting a handful of silver into her apron. "You are our saviour. They'll hang us if they get us."

"Dey don' get yo' if ole Aunt Dora knows it," asserted the negress. "Jes' yo' come wif me!"

She led the way through the main room of the dwelling and out at the back door. A little courtyard was revealed.

To the casual glance the stone flagging of this court was firmly set and betrayed no suspicion of anything beneath but the solid earth.

But the old negress, putting her fingers under one of the flags, lifted it. An aperture large enough to admit the body of a man was revealed.

Within the square underground apartment the fugitives now crept. The negress placed the flag back in place.

Some light entered the place through cracks above. It proved to be a sort of larder for the safe keeping of vegetables and other supplies, and was a clever invention of the builder to keep his provisions from being stolen by the soldiers.

It was somewhat cramped quarters, but an incident soon happened which caused the fugitives to bless it just the same. Loud voices and the rattle of arms came to their hearing.

"Great guns!" gasped Clements. "I believe they have found us. We are lost if Aunt Dora betrays us."

The suspense was painful. The shrill voice of Aunt Dora could be heard:

"Dunno nuffin' 'bout wha' yo' am talkin' 'bout! Ain' no Confedrit sogers in mah house an' yo' needn't fink dar is. Jes' go on about yo' bizness an' leave a po' ole brack woman alone, yo' good fo' nuffin' Yankees."

Coarse laughter was heard, and then the tramp of feet on the flags above. But, though it was a suspenseful moment for the fugitives, they were not molested or discovered.

Presently the footsteps died away and, with a breath of relief, Will whispered:

"A close shave, but I guess we've fooled them this time."

"That's what we've done," said Clements. "We owe it to Aunt Dora."

"Gee whizz!" exclaimed Spotswood. "It seems to me that they are scouring Fredericksburg pretty thoroughly."

"They mean to get us if they can."

"Well, they may succeed yet," said Clements. "But I doubt it, if we can remain here safely until darkness comes."

"That's all we want."

It seemed an age until they heard scraping footsteps above and then a flood of daylight appeared. In the aperture above was the black face of Aunt Dora.

"I done fink yo' is all right now," she said. "Dey won't fin' yo' berry easy."

"We owe it all to you, Aunt Dora," said Will. "We shan't forget it."

"That's right, Aunt Dora!" cried Clements. "You fooled them good."

"I done bring yo' some fried chicken an' toast," said the old negress, handing down a small basket. "Dere am a bottle ob Scuppernong wine fo' yo', too."

It is not easy to express the feelings of the fugitives. That they were grateful goes without saying.

The sides of tender chicken, fried and placed between slices of toast, as only the Southern mammy knows how to cook chicken, made a most delectable repast. The wine of the Scuppernong grape made a delightful relish.

The boys and the scout could not express their gratitude fully. They partook of their repast and felt decidedly better.

"Golly!" exclaimed the orderly sergeant of the Virginia Grays. "I feel as if I could lift a house. If we ever get down to that picket line, you bet no corporal's guard will stop us."

"You're right, Joe!" cried Will, "that's our only hope, to get past the picket."

"I believe it will be safe for us to go up above for a while," said Clements. "They won't come back here. I am cramped with staying here. Are you willing to risk it?"

"I am," said Will, and Joe was also agreed. Consultation with Aunt Dora was had and she agreed with them.

"I done fink yo' be safe enuff," she said. "Mah ole man be here berry soon. He keep watch fo' yo'."

So the fugitives came out of the cellar and found more comfortable quarters in Aunt Dora's kitchen.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BOLD DASH.

As the old colored woman had predicted her "old man" soon returned. He was a good specimen of the Southern negro of the servant class, he serving as butler in one of the leading families of Fredericksburg.

He welcomed the fugitives, and was as sympathetic with them as Aunt Dora. Neither of these faithful negroes had been influenced by the attractive promises of freedom advanced by the Union Government. For that matter both had for long owned their freedom.

The day was now at an end and night soon shut down over Fredericksburg, dark and moonless. A few stars twinkled in the blue canopy above.

Not until almost midnight did the Confederate fugitives venture to leave their hiding place.

When they finally crept out of the alley and emerged once more upon the street, it was with rapidly beating hearts.

Down the dark street they walked. A soldier passed them in the dark. They almost expected him to accost them. But he did not.

They kept on with tense nerves seeking the shadowed side of the street. They passed open shops and the doors of many houses, where lights and laughter showed midnight revelry.

Gradually they were leaving the town behind them. Soon they came to open lots and saw camp-fires of newly arrived troops by the fortifications.

Once again they threaded their way past encamped regiments and under the guns of the batteries. Every moment now they were drawing nearer freedom and safety.

Only one barrier remained. This was the picket guard.

It was more than likely that he had received orders to examine every man passing out of the lines.

Soon they came within easy distance of the picket. He could be seen pacing his beat just below. They halted.

"The last jump," whispered Clements. "How are we going to make it?"

"If we try to pass him he will certainly give the alarm."

"Yes."

The scout pondered a moment. Then he took Will's gun and unlocked the bayonet. He weighed it in his hand.

"No doubt you wonder what my purpose is," he said, "but I will tell you. I spent a number of years with a tribe of Indians beyond the Mississippi. I learned many of their arts and among them that of throwing the tomahawk. I believe this bayonet could be made fully as deadly a weapon."

The boys were startled.

"Can you throw it?" asked Will.

"I think I can."

"Will you try it?"

"I shall. Let the plan be this. Both of you walk down and salute the guard. I will come up in the shadows from the left. Before he can call the guard and while you claim his attention I will run up near enough to throw it. Once I get within range, I'll bring him down without an outcry."

"How could you do that?"

The scout placed a hand across his neck.

"That way!" he said. "If I can get within range the chances of my missing are one in one thousand."

The boys hastened to carry out their part of their plan. They strolled down toward the sentry.

"Halt!" was the command.

"What for?" asked Will quietly.

"I have orders to let no one pass out to-night without examination by the guard."

"Oh, pshaw! We're all right, comrade. We want to go out and see the country. We'll bring ye back a little good corn whiskey."

"That don't tempt me!" growled the picket. "Go back or I'll call the guard."

Almost as the words left his lips there was a whistling sound, a dull thud and a gurgling gasp. Some object shot from the gloom and struck the sentry in the throat.

He reeled, tried to raise his musket and fell in a heap. In an instant Clements was with the boys.

"Quick!" he cried. "There is no time to lose. We've got to get back to our horses."

They fled away like deer into the night. From Fredericksburg came the tolling of a bell. The picket beyond took up the cry:

"Post thirty-four! Twelve of the clock and all's well!"

The fugitives knew that the next picket would not take up the cry. There would be an investigation and pursuit. All depended upon putting as much distance as possible between them and the lines of the Union Army.

On they ran like mad. Down into a ravine, up the opposite side, over a ridge, through tall oaks and then they came to open fields.

A light of a farmhouse glimmered in the distance. For an hour they had kept on thus and now came to a highway. A copse was just beyond.

"Here we are!" cried Clements. "We are in luck. This is our road. The old church is a few miles beyond here, and yonder is where we left our horses."

"Shall we find them there?"

"That is a question."

Into the copse they plunged. It had been two days and a night since they had left the horses. That they might still be there was possible, but they knew that prowling scouts or guerrillas might have found them.

Deep into the copse they plunged. Then they heard a welcome sound. It was a horse's neigh.

"Hurrah!" cried Will. "Here are the horses all safe. They must be hungry."

"We can't wait to feed them," said Clements. "We will have to defer that until daybreak."

The horses were found just as they had been left. They were untethered and the fugitives mounted. Back to the road they galloped and away toward the old church.

On they rode and it was not long before the tower of the old church burst into view, outlined against the sky. All seemed dark and quiet about the place, and a sudden chill struck the boy-captain with the thought that perhaps the Grays were no longer there.

For aught he knew they might have been hemmed in by the foe and forced to surrender, or at least to seek a safer locality.

But Will knew Fred Randolph well enough to feel sure that he would not surrender under ordinary circumstances.

Just then though, a sharp cry rang out:

"Halt!"

The riders pulled up their horses. It was a picket guard who stood in their path. In a moment the tramp of feet was heard as the guard came rushing out.

Will did not wait for further challenge or to give the countersign. He knew that only the Grays could be stationed here.

"Hurrah, Grays!" he shouted. "Turn out the guard to escort us in."

His voice was recognized by the picket who sent up a cry: "It's Captain Prentiss! Hurrah, boys! Turn out everybody!"

Then there was an uproar. From the old church thronged the Boys in Gray. Will and his companions were surrounded by the young soldiers.

Fred Randolph fairly embraced his young captain.

"Well, I am glad to see you back," he cried. "I feared that you had been taken prisoner."

"We were taken prisoners," replied Will. "We have all been under guard. But we managed to escape."

"Good!" cried the young lieutenant. "Fortune is with us. Tell us all about it."

Back to the church all went. Seated in the midst of the Grays Will told the story of their adventure.

The boys listened with deepest interest. When Will had concluded his story he said:

"Now, boys, it is easy for you to see that it is absolutely necessary for us to get out of this locality as quickly as possible. We must return at once to Richmond and report to General Lee."

"Hurrah!" cried the Grays.

"Do you mean to start at once?" asked Fred.

Will hesitated. Clements, who had been a listener, said:

"Captain Prentiss, I would advise you not to start at once. Your horses need feed and you need some rest yourself. I think we will be safe here until daybreak."

"Very well," agreed Will. "Let it be so. We will remain here until morning. Then with sunrise we must be on the move."

Will and Joe and Clements now sought sleep. They rolled themselves up in their blankets and slept on the dusty floor of the church.

They slept soundly and well, and the rest was what they needed. With reveille Will sprang up, and now proceeded to exchange his uniform of blue for his own. They had, through all, managed to bring their own uniforms back.

The Grays, after breakfast, quickly packed their effects and were soon in marching order. They fell into line and Will mounted his horse, and rode ahead with Clements, the scout.

They took a course which they believed would lead them to the North Anna. The morning was clear, though the roads were yet a bit muddy.

The spirits of the Grays were high. They felt that their campaign had been a success and they were on their way home. It was a pleasant reflection.

Down the country highway they marched. Will did not neglect every precaution for safety.

He kept videttes far ahead, and the Grays were halted frequently until some possible evidence of the enemy ahead was investigated.

Joe Spotswood, since his experience in Fredericksburg, was quite the lion of the company.

He did not neglect to rehearse all his thrilling experiences, and especially the overpowering of the prison guard. His comrades listened with rapt admiration.

Thus the little company of Grays marched on. They were in the land of the foe. On every hand were evidences of them. At any moment they might be attacked and overwhelmed. The danger of their position was its chief fascination.

But they reached the banks of the North Anna in safety about noon. As they bivouacked in the shade of some trees Clements, the scout, dismounted and approaching Will said:

"It looks as if you had now no further cause for fear. I think when you have made the other bank of the river you will go back to Richmond without mishap."

"I hope so," said Will.

"Then," said the scout, "I need tarry with you no longer."

"What!" exclaimed the boy-captain, with a shade of disappointment in his voice. "You will not leave us?"

"I fear that I must. I have other and serious duties. I must do important work about Washington."

"I shall be sorry to part company with you, Clements," said Will. "We have had many exciting experiences together."

"So we have," agreed the scout. "But we shall meet later I hope."

CHAPTER XIV.

A CHALLENGE.

After an hour's rest, Will sent a detail to look for a suitable fordway. This was found in due time.

Then the Grays crossed to the south bank of the Anna. Once across they felt safe. It seemed as if they had emerged from the jaws of a trap.

But they did not dream that this was far from being the case. Hardly had they marched a mile from the river when one of the Grays in the front rank gave a sharp cry of agony and pitched forward upon his face.

Bullets went singing over their heads. Will saw that they had no time to lose in seeking cover.

Quickly he gave the order to deploy and they fell back behind a rail fence in good order. Four of the little company lay dead in the road.

And so far, not one of the foe had been seen. Just ahead in a cover of oak they could see a faint cloud of smoke.

This alone told where the foe was. Will at once gave orders to return the fire.

The Grays obeyed and soon the battle was growing hot. The air was full of Minie balls.

The Grays began to fall back slowly, for Will saw that the force in front of him was far superior. In fact it seemed as if he must be opposed to a full regiment.

"Too bad!" said Fred. "I had no idea we would meet the foe on this side of the river."

"Nor I!" agreed Will. "But it can't be helped. It looks as if we were trapped."

With the river back of them certainly the position of the Grays was not the most reassuring.

Will now endeavored to throw his line about to the southward, with the idea of changing the line of battle. To his dismay, fire was opened upon his left flank.

"We are lost," said Fred with white face. "I see no way out of it, Will."

"We must make a quick retreat until we find high ground."

"Then they will surround us."

"It can't be helped. There is absolutely no other move."

So Will gave the order and the Grays began to fall back rapidly. The affair had now assumed the aspect of a running fight.

The foe were now seen deploying from the woods. A blue line extended far to the east, and enveloped the left end of the Grays' line.

Rapidly now the little company fell back. It seemed as if the worst disaster of all had befallen them.

After extricating themselves from their position of a few days before it did indeed seem hard that they must now face the almost certainty of capture. But Will was clear-headed and cool.

"Steady, boys!" he said in his even way. "We will fool them yet."

Now, once again the height, back of which was the river, came into view.

Will studied the situation carefully.

He reckoned that if he could gain those heights he could make a desperate stand on better ground. But he saw that the foe was numerous enough to surround them. The outlook was desperate.

To maintain the retreat would have been possible under other circumstances. But they would under the present conditions be forced back into Fredericksburg.

And that would mean the sealing of their fate. Sadly now Will missed the clever foresight and advice of Clements.

The scout had taken his departure. He was ere now many miles to the north.

But the Grays kept good order. Their fire was telling and held the foe. Nearer they drew to the higher ground.

Thus the situation was and Will was ready to yield to despair, when a great cry went up from some of the boys on the right flank.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

The cheers rang upon the air wildly. Then Will heard the volleying of firearms far to his right and beheld a scene which made his veins tingle.

A great cloud of cavalry had swept down into the field. What was more, its uniforms were gray.

Will placed his glass to his eyes and studied the distant guidon. He gave a sharp cry of joy:

"We are saved!" he cried. "It is Stuart!"

Wildly the Grays cheered. Fred came rushing up excitedly.

"Stuart has come up in time," he said. "The Union troops are falling back."

"That is the best of news," declared Will. "We are surely saved. An hour longer and the Virginia Grays might have been out of the game of war."

Down came the columns of Stuart with wild valor. The Union infantry line began to bend back.

The Grays, now no longer fearful, started forward to join in the pursuit. The battle which ensued was short, but sharp and decisive.

The Union line was driven back and the field belonged to Stuart. The cavalymen were still pursuing the foe, when Stuart himself, with his staff, rode up.

He saluted and cried:

"Oh, Captain Prentiss! I am glad to see you! You were in hot water."

"You are right, General Stuart," replied Will. "We owe our salvation to you."

"You were making a good stand."

"Yes, but we were outnumbered."

"Very likely. However, you have nothing to fear now. What is the news from Richmond?"

The great cavalry leader dismounted and joined the young captain.

"Little of interest that I can tell, I fear," said Will. "I have been away from there a week. I hope to return soon."

"Oh! scouting, are you?"

"Yes, under orders from General Lee."

"Have you had success?"

"I think I may say so. I have penetrated the enemy's lines and viewed his works."

Stuart gave a cry of surprise.

"The deuce you have!" he exclaimed. "Why, my best scouts have failed. They hold the line close at Fredericksburg."

"So they do. But I got through with the aid of Clements."

"Oh! he is a clever fellow."

"I think so."

"Is he with you now?"

"No. He has gone north to Washington. I believe he will remain there until Lee makes his sortie from Richmond."

Stuart looked at Will critically.

"Then you think General Lee will really venture that sortie into Maryland, do you?"

"I know it."

"Is that possible? I very much fear he will be a disappointed man."

"He counts upon the people of Maryland rising to assist him."

Stuart shook his head.

"They will never do it," he said. "I know the Maryland people well. They have little interest in this war. They will never join the Confederacy. I fear Lee is making a bad move."

"Of course, you may be mistaken."

"I will admit that," said Stuart, "but I much fear that I am not."

Just then Will ran his gaze critically over the members of Stuart's staff. As he did so he gave a great start.

On a black horse, and with his piercing black eyes fixed vengefully upon him, Will saw Delaplaine.

The Confederate colonel's gaze held bitter hatred and spite. He glared at the boy-captain so steadily that Will averted his gaze.

He was half tempted to bring to Stuart's attention the matter in which Delaplaine had been involved. But he reflected that Stuart would regard it as a matter beyond his authority.

So he said nothing. General Stuart now dispatched an orderly to call his men back. The sun was low in the western sky and night was at hand.

"I shall bivouac here, Captain Prentiss," he said. "Do you think of going further to-night?"

"No," replied Will. "It would hardly be safe for me to do that. I need your protection and if you remain here I had better."

"I think so myself," agreed General Stuart. "Remain, and in the morning I will accompany you a safe distance on your way."

"Thank you, general! I shall be glad to avail myself of your kind offer."

So Will gave orders for the Grays to go into bivouac. They were soon engaged in doing this.

On the whole the Grays had certainly been fortunate in the turn affairs had taken.

If Stuart had not so opportunely appeared on the scene their present position would have been a very doubtful one.

The cavalymen spread themselves out over the field. Their horses were picketed and fed on the dry grass of the plain. The men ate rations of hard-tack, pork and coffee.

Soon their camp-fires were burning in a bright manner. Picket guards were established and darkness settled down.

Will and Fred had a small tent which they erected on the hillside. Here they made headquarters, and they had just finished their frugal evening meal, when suddenly into the firelight strode two men.

They were both cavalymen. Both boys sprang to their feet. One of the visitors was familiar to them as Delaplaine.

The villain's face was purple with passion and fury and he could hardly control himself sufficiently to say:

"Captain Prentiss! You know me?"

"Colonel Delaplaine!" replied Will.

"That is my name. This is my friend, Captain Manly. I suppose you can guess the purpose of my visit here?"

"I have not the most remote idea," replied Will.

"It is to demand satisfaction for the insult and wrong you have given me."

Will was for a moment silent. He saw the villain's purpose. He smiled in a quiet way and the cavalryman, shaking his head, angrily cried:

"Well, why don't you answer?"

"There is nothing to answer."

"What!" scoffed Delaplaine. "You fear me?"

"Not the least particle."

"You refuse me satisfaction?"

"Please specify for what you ask satisfaction?"

"For insult and injury."

"Be specific! What injury?"

"Words, words!" cried the colonel thickly. "Come down to common sense. You know what occurred between us."

"I know that I championed a young woman against your villainy. You hounded her lover to his death and you would have forcibly abducted her, had I not intervened."

Will bowed to Captain Manly.

"These, sir, are the facts in the case," he said. "Do you care to second a man who has this charge against him?"

"Colonel Delaplaine is my friend," said Manly stiffly.

"Very good!" replied Will. "What sort of satisfaction do you ask from me, Delaplaine, for protecting this young Southern girl from your villainy?"

"Insult upon insult!" gritted Delaplaine. "You are witness, Manly. Listen, you cowardly poltroon. I demand

that you fight me with pistols or swords. I challenge you to fight."

Will bowed coldly to the request.

CHAPTER XV.

WHICH IS THE END.

"I think you are mistaken in your man, Delaplaine," said Will. "I enjoy no reputation as a duellist."

"Oh! you seek to hedge."

"No I don't."

"Then you will fight me?"

"Will you really fight?"

"I'll show you!" gritted Delaplaine. "I am a dead-shot with a pistol. I trained with the best masters in Germany with the sword."

"I am quite an adept with my fists in the good American style," said Will. "As the choice of weapons rests with me, suppose I choose them."

"Bah!" cried Delaplaine furiously. "Away with your jesting. Shall I cuff you on the spot to make you fight?"

"Try it!" said the young captain quietly. "You will find it quite provocation enough."

"My second is here," said Delaplaine. "He will meet yours."

"Mine is here," said Will, indicating Fred. "Is he acceptable?"

"I know of no reason why he is not," said Delaplaine. "Manly, I will leave you to make the arrangements."

"Gentlemen," said Fred, stepping forward, "this is foolish business. The South has need of all her fighting men at present. They should not fight among themselves. You had better settle this matter peacefully."

"Never!" roared Delaplaine. "I demand satisfaction. I will make him fight."

Fred looked at Will. The boy-captain nodded and said in an undertone:

"It will give me pleasure to cut his comb, Fred. He is a big coward."

"And you really will fight him?"

"Yes."

"What weapons do you choose?"

"Swords, of course. I don't want to kill him, neither do I want him to kill me."

"He is a Frenchman and I have no doubt he is a good swordsman."

"You forget that my father fenced with the best men of Europe and taught me every trick he knew."

Fred smiled and replied:

"Yes, I know. I have faith in you. You only want to humiliate him."

"That is all. I don't want his worthless life. I am not thirsting for blood."

The two young officers laughed. Delaplaine and Manly were waiting. Fred now advanced and said:

"My client demands the choice of weapons as the challenged party."

"He has the choice!" cried Delaplaine. "What is his choice?"

"Swords!"

The Frenchman smiled in a diabolical way. He stroked the tuft of beard upon his chin.

"I am well content," he said.

Fred now conferred with Manly. After some moments the latter announced:

"All is arranged. The hour is sunrise. The place a glade, a quarter of a mile from here. The weapons, swords!"

"Good!" cried Delaplaine, with apparent satisfaction. "Now I shall have my revenge."

He turned away with his second. When he had gone, Will drew his sword from its sheath and quietly felt the temper.

"Fred," he said quietly, "I am not so foolish as to think that I have an absolute superiority over that fellow. He is a swordsman. He may know a trick I do not know. But, in case he bests me, he will kill me. I see murder in his eye. In that case, I wish you would send this sword to my sister. It is an heirloom."

Fred gasped convulsively and said:

"Well, it is no disgrace to refuse such a contest. Let the scoundrel go."

The young captain's face hardened.

"No," he said. "He is a bully and a coward. I will defeat him and disgrace him. I will meet him."

A few moments later the young captain was wrapped in his blanket and sleeping soundly. He was not as nervous over the situation as his young lieutenant.

The night passed without incident. Just as the sun, a ball of fire, rose over the peaks of the Shenandoah Mountains, two men entered a glade just beyond the line of Stuart's encampment.

"The coward won't appear," growled Delaplaine as he pulled off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. "He fears me."

"Then you can further insult him," said Manly, his second. "Subject him to some indignity."

"Strange that he chose swords. Most of these Americans fight with pistols."

But just then from the further end of the glade two men appeared. Will and his lieutenant walked nonchalantly forward and saluted.

"Good morning, gentlemen!"

Will threw off his coat and unsheathed his sword and said:

"I have a pressing engagement. Let us waste no time here."

"Your engagement will never be kept!" hissed Delaplaine as his blade crossed the other. "Ha! have at it!"

The two blades played like flashes of lightning in the morning air. Delaplaine's face showed surprise which gradually waxed into fear.

He found every trick of his own matched by those of his foe. He even discovered that several times he had been at the mercy of the young Virginia captain and that he owed his life to the other's mercy.

For a time this infuriated him and he tried by sheer strength to beat down the other's guard. Will only smiled and said:

"Delaplaine, I know life is dear to you. It did not occur to you that I could use a sword or you would not have met me. You do not wish to die. I can kill you any moment I choose. This is no bluff, I mean it. On one condition I will spare your life. Swear that you will persecute Miss Cameron never again."

A savage cry escaped Delaplaine.

"I'll kill you!" he yelled. "I will have your blood!"

Will again and again displaced his guard. He pricked his neck, his chest and slashed his cheek. Fear and agony contorted the villain's face.

"I yield!" he cried. "You are a demon with the sword. There is not your equal in Berlin. I accept your terms."

Will stepped back. Trembling and exhausted, the conquered villain was assisted to dress by his second.

A man in a handsome uniform stepped down into the glade.

"Really, gentlemen, I am sorry not to have seen more of the sword-play. I do you the justice to declare that it was the best I ever saw."

General Stuart advanced and shook hands with the combatants. All laughed and together strolled back to camp.

It was not a week later that news reached Will in Richmond that Delaplaine had met his death in a cavalry charge. It removed forever all fear of further persecution from the mind of Edith Cameron, and Will Prentiss exclaimed:

"Well, I am glad his blood was not on my hands."

The Grays reached Richmond safely after a forced march. Will reported to General Lee in full, and won great praise from that distinguished leader.

All preparations were now made for the great northward march into Maryland. How it was accomplished and what part the Virginia Grays took in it we must leave to a future story.

And this brings to an end this account of the adventures of Will Prentiss and his Grays about Fredericksburg, when they were for a time under guard in the hands of the enemy.

THE END.

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